THE COMPLETE AC/DC STORY

SPECIAL CLASSIC ROCK EDITION

AC/DC

EVERY ERA COVERED

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

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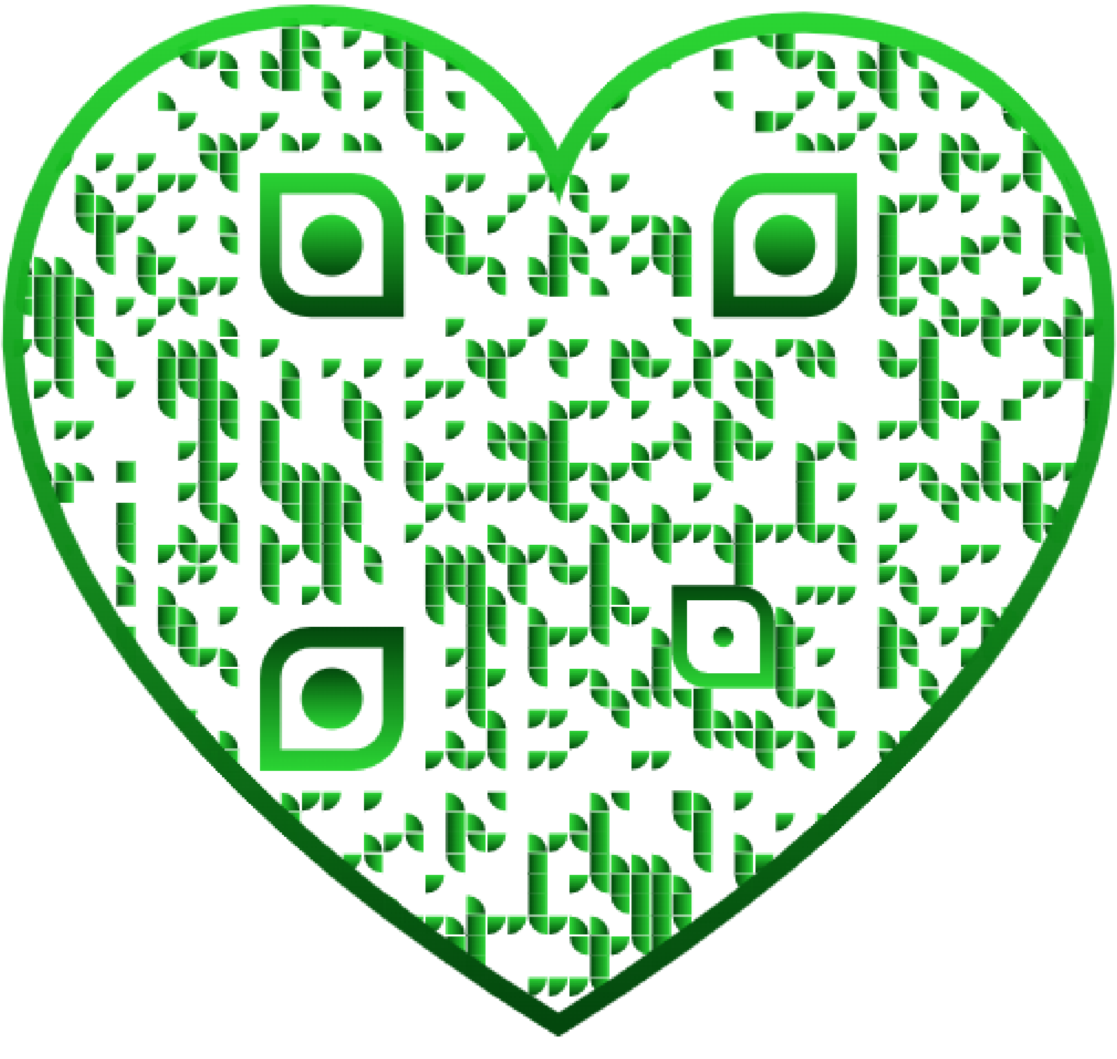
THE MYSTERY OF BON SCOTT'S DEATH

The inside story of the death of a legend – now updated

THE 30 BEST AC/DC SONGS

As chosen by Joe Perry, Billy Corgan, Slash, Billy Gibbons & more



AC/DC

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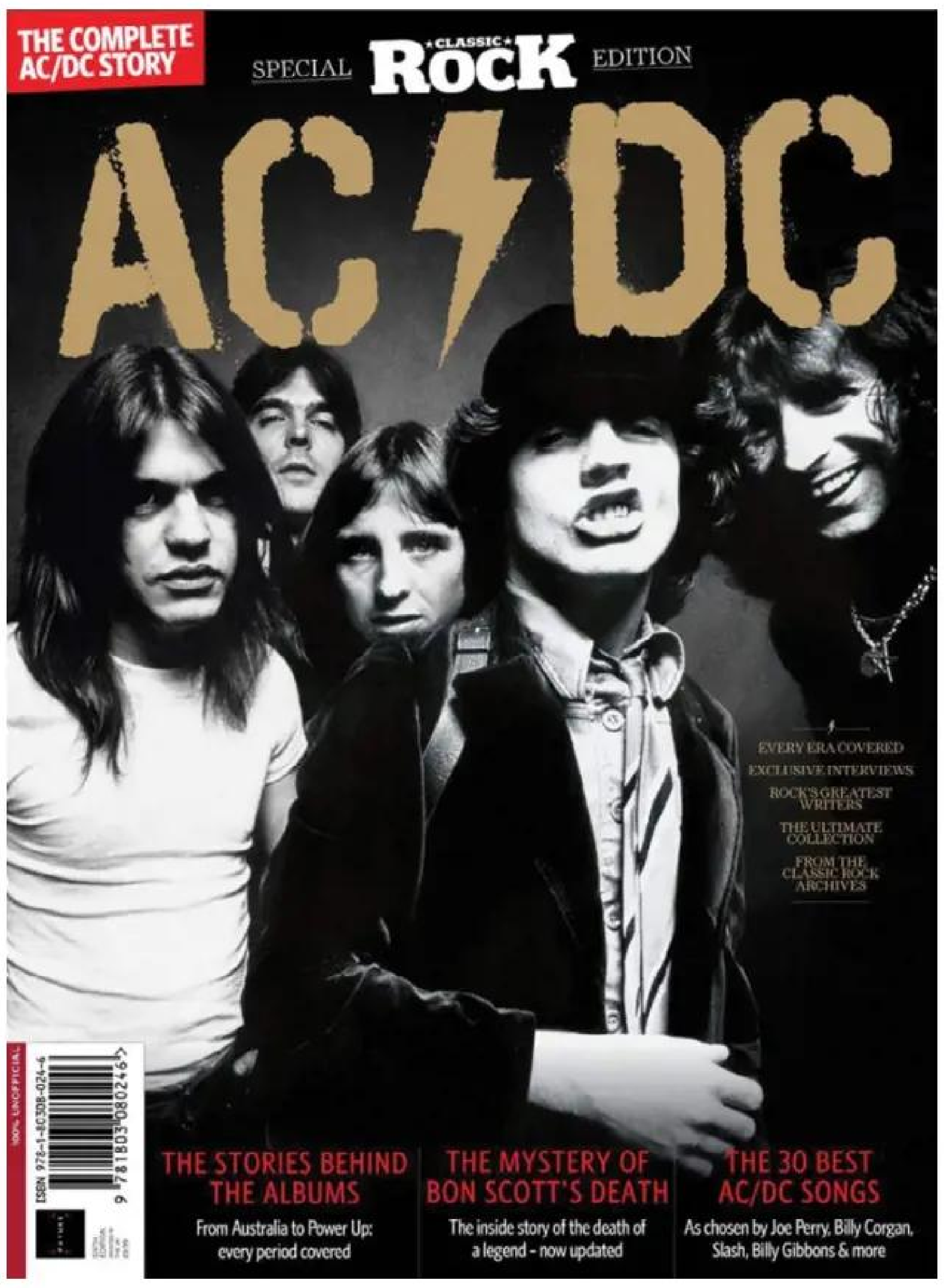
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Are AC/DC the greatest rock band of all time? They just might be.

They're certainly the band that brings the *Classic Rock* office together – the one band we all agree on. For some people, Led Zeppelin are too poncey – too trendy and celebrated. To others, Deep Purple are too artless, Guns N' Roses overrated, Black Sabbath too inconsistent, The Who too mod, Iron Maiden too juvenile, Metallica too puerile, blah blah blah… Hey, you can't please everyone. Unless, of course, you're AC/DC.

Now, having celebrated their 50th anniversary, it's a given that AC/DC bring people together. Exciting, heavy, groovy, funny, unpretentious, timeless, they were the cover stars of *Classic Rock*'s best-selling issue ever (*CR*125 in November 2008), which came out just as the band returned with *Black Ice*. For another cover (*CR*115), Art Director Brad Merrett spent an unhealthy amount of time looking at the bulge in Bon Scott's trousers – and Photoshopping it out (it was so pronounced, our publisher feared that WH Smith might take us off the shelves. If you're up there, Bon, please forgive us).

Over the years, we've covered Bon's death – a story that gets a brief update here – and the band's resurrection with *Back In Black*, and everything in between. Some of our writers got drunk with Bon (the late Harry Doherty, for one, whose drunken day out with Bon is recounted here), and were there at their first UK gigs. *Prog* magazine Editor Jerry Ewing – an Aussie by birth – saw them in Australia when he was 10. When the band announced that Brian Johnson had left and was to be replaced by Axl Rose, we were there for their first European shows with him.

What next for AC/DC? Who knows. In late 2020, the band announced a reunion with Brian Johnson and launched a chart-topping new album, *Power Up*, heralding a new era for the legendary rockers. But what will that era bring? We'll have to wait and see.

Until then, join us as we celebrate the greatest rock band of them all. Brace yourselves for five destructive decades of dirty deeds, riff raff and rock'n'roll damnation. If you want blood, you got it…

Scott

Scott Rowley,
Content Director

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Jane Birkin

MARTYN GODDARD/GETTY

AC/DC

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THE BALLAD OF BON SCOTT

Before he joined AC/DC, Bon Scott was in country rockers the Mount Lofty Rangers, until a near-fatal crash. The two tracks they recorded were long lost – until now.

Words: **Rod Yates**

Bon Scott rarely missed a gig, but on May 3, 1974, even he knew he was too pissed to pull it off. Fresh from a drunken fight with then-wife Irene, the singer got on his Triumph motorbike and sped halfway across Adelaide to where his bandmates in country-rock outfit Mount Lofty Rangers were rehearsing. He planned to tell them he'd not be joining them at the Old Lion Hotel that night – driving under the influence was one thing, but Scott wouldn't get on stage unless he could do the job.

During his short visit, Scott got in a fight with Rangers bassist Bruce Howe. The two had clashed before – they'd both been members of hard-drinking hippy rockers Fraternity, and came to blows during one of that band's fraught jams – but tonight it didn't take much to test Scott's temper. No one can remember what set him off, but after the resulting bust-up he stormed off, drunkenly walking into the door three times on his way out.

"We tried to stop him," recalls Rangers keyboardist, Peter Head. "I remember saying, 'Bon, don't go off, you're too drunk, you can't drive,' but because he was pissed he didn't listen to any of us. This," he sighs, "was nothing unusual." An hour later, Head received a call. After tearing off on his Triumph, Bon had collided head on with a car. He survived, but only just – beaten, battered and near death, the singer spent three days in a coma. It would take him a long, long time to recover.

"We didn't go and see him for a few days 'cos he was in intensive care and they didn't know if he was going to live," says Head. "When we did go he looked terrible – he'd lost all his teeth, he was a total mess, he was covered in bruises and scratches."

The crash brought an end to Scott's four-month, 12-gig career with the Mount Lofty Rangers. By October 1974, following months of recuperation, he'd left Adelaide for Sydney and a career with AC/DC. But tantalisingly, he'd left behind recordings of two songs that are only now getting a proper airing, 40 years after the event.

Peter Head refers to himself as the Mount Lofty Rangers' "musical director". More a collective of like-minded musicians than a band, some 240 members passed through between 1974 and 1979, among them future Cold Chisel frontman and Little River Band vocalist Glenn Shorrock. But Bon Scott is their most famous old boy.

The Rangers came together after Head's previous band, progressive blues rockers HeadBand, split at the start of 1974. The latter shared management with Fraternity – "We had the same tour bus, we did the same gigs together," 67-year-old Head recalls – and he became good friends with Scott. Head formed the Rangers to stave off boredom and starvation. Bon was one of several singers they had, most of whom played instruments. "We were all sitting around broke, and I thought the easiest way to get by was to throw together a country rock band," recalls Head, who has called Sydney home for the past 30 years. "We could do a few dozen three-chord country songs, have a bit of fun and throw it together quickly."

That initial brief became more colourful as members came and went. "There were bizarre gigs where we'd have a violinist from a symphony orchestra, a guitar player from Fraternity, a piano accordion or a sitar player," says Head. "It was such an amalgamation of bizarre instruments and people. We played everything from jazz to rock to Indian music." The original line-up featured members of Fraternity and HeadBand and had their first jam in a garage in the suburbs of Adelaide in January, 1974. Rehearsals would often spill out onto the driveway and morph into street parties.

"I think we had a ten-piece version," Head says of that first gathering, "but Bon's voice cut through the guitars and drums. You could tell there was something special when he sang. With the Rangers he was singing mainly country music; we did a lot of really fast bluegrass country, which Bon loved. He also liked jazz and blues, not only the stuff he was famous for. That's what I like to show in the old recordings, that there's another side to Bon apart from the AC/DC side everybody knows."

But the wildcat side to the singer's personality was still there. Head recalls walking through the centre of Adelaide with Bon one night to their favourite drinking hole, the Largs Pier Hotel. As they neared their destination, three men emerged from the shadows. It turned out that their girlfriends each had a thing for the singer – not uncommon at the time, despite Scott's wiry frame and hard-knock looks – and they were none too pleased about it. "Bon was up there in a flash. He stood these guys down," chuckles Head today. "They saw how ready he was to fight and they pissed off. He made them back down."

On another occasion, the Mount Lofty Rangers performed in Adelaide's notorious Yatala Jail, where Head had been teaching guitar. After learning of Johnny Cash's gig at San Quentin, he went to the prison authorities and suggested the Rangers do a show. That many of them had been incarcerated for marijuana-related crimes – a drug Head and Scott made no secret of enjoying – gave band and inmates more in common than a love of music, and the Rangers were treated like heroes. "When we finished, we had a distance to go from the stage inside the jail to the gates, and it

FIN COSTELLO/GETTY

"THE FILM IS GOING TO HAPPEN"

In 2014 it's looking extremely likely that Bon Scott will be everywhere.

In the wake of the re-release of *Round And Round And Round*, more of Bon Scott's pre-AC/DC output is set to surface over the next 12 months. Next to have its backing music re-recorded while preserving Scott's original vocal is the ballad *Carey Gully* – technology has improved to the point where, despite the original recording existing only on quarter-inch tape, Scott's vocal can be separated from the music. In addition, the two songs Peter Head helped Scott finish – *Clarissa* and *I've Been Up In The Hills Too Long* – are also set to be re-recorded musically and vocally.

"There's a lot of big-name rockers that will be involved in that whole thing," says Damien Reilly, CEO of Blue Pie Records, although he stops short of naming names. "They're iconic bands, they're in the top fifty bands in the world. Where are you going to get an opportunity to work on either a Bon Scott-written song or something that's got his vocal on it?"

Also in the works is a film about Scott's life prior to joining AC/DC, in which Head will act as one of the historical researchers.

"We've been approached by a scriptwriter in LA and a film production company," says Reilly, whose label will help source music for the film, "and we've signed one set of agreements, I can tell you that much. The script has Bon's friends and former associates of the time period 1969 to 1974 providing input, and there has been an incredible body of research done by the scriptwriter, who was a very good friend of Vince Lovegrove. There have been a lot of people that have tried to get a film up and running but just haven't had the right vibe to it. But this is going to happen."

Adelaide hillbillies: the Rangers in Southern Oz.

seemed like just about every prisoner lined up on the side of their cells and rattled their pans and screamed out: 'Hey Bon! Thanks for coming!' Just about the whole jail gave us a standing ovation on the way out."

For all the bravado, Scott was at a crossroads in his life when he threw in his lot with the Mount Lofty Rangers. Dejected by a decade of missed opportunities with acts such as The Spektors, The Valentines and Fraternity, he was frightened that, at 27, he was getting too old to make it as a singer. His frame of mind wasn't helped by how, as Fraternity limped to an end and played only the occasional gig, he had to take menial jobs to make ends meet. It wasn't the first time – Head worked at an art gallery in the early 70s, and its owner would employ Bon to mow the lawns and do odd jobs. "We'd often sit there for hours and nobody would come in the gallery," recalls Head. "We'd have a couple of acoustic guitars and we'd start to write songs together."

By the time he joined the Rangers, Bon had a job at a fertiliser plant in Wallaroo, a few hours outside Adelaide. It was back-breaking work. "One time I met him and he'd been working on the back of a truck lugging around bags of shit for ten hours, which is really hard work," says Head. "He came to my place after that particular day and said: 'While I've been lugging around these bags, I've had two songs running around in my head.' He asked me to help get them together, because he knew about three chords on the guitar and that's it. So we sat around for another six hours and worked them out."

The two songs were *Clarissa* – "A lovely ballad," recalls Head – and the more rambunctious *I've Been Up In The Hills Too Long*. In return, Scott agreed to sing on Head's demos for two songs he wrote: piano-boogie rocker *Round And Round* and the pastoral *Carey Gully*, the latter as far removed from AC/DC's three-chord bluster as you can get. Determined to get Head's songs on tape, they booked a session at Adelaide's Slater Studios, the city's first eight-track recording studio. At AUD$40 for a two-hour session its facilities were beyond the reach of many – the average weekly wage in Australia in 1974 was around $120 – but for Head and Scott the thrill of graduating from four-track to something more professional was such that they were willing to dig roads for a few days.

Head can't remember the date of the session, but he does recall it lasting two hours. The pair were joined in the studio by musician mates including guitarist Phil Caulson, Fraternity drummer John Freeman and future Angels bassist Chris Bailey. Scott and Head taught the others each song and then recorded it. There was little time to finesse what they had done. "On the tapes I can hear Bon laughing his head off at the end of a first take, cos he went for a really high note and didn't quite hit it," says Head. "He got it right the second time. He was quick, he was efficient."

"BON SANG COUNTRY MUSIC. IT SHOWED A DIFFERENT SIDE TO HIM."
PETER HEAD

It wasn't the pair's only experience of working in a studio. "We did some jingles together in 1974 for a country radio station, 2ST, and he just churned them out," says Head. "I've got a copy of them somewhere. I don't think the radio station ever realised they had Bon Scott singing."

Head's ambitions for *Round And Round* and *Carey Gully* were slight. "We hoped we might sell a couple of dozen copies in Adelaide. We didn't have a record company. We did it for the sake of the music and that's it. But Bon was very enthusiastic about helping and said: 'I hope something happens with this one day and I hope it works for you.'"

Bon's motorbike crash in May 1974 marked the end of his tenure in the Mount Lofty Rangers. After the accident, Head himself temporarily abandoned the Rangers in favour of solo piano-bar gigs, tired of the responsibility of keeping a band going. He

Bon Scott (second left) with the Mount Lofty Rangers.

"Bon loved country, jazz and blues" – and rock'n'roll.

and Bon still spent time together. At one point they were employed by local promoter Vince Lovegrove to put up posters for touring bands – one of which was AC/DC, for whom Scott ended up acting as driver and tour guide shortly after he got out of hospital. But Scott and Head would never work together again musically. The next time Scott entered a studio, it was in November 1974 as a member of AC/DC.

"We thought he was copping out a bit joining AC/DC, cos they were a pretty simple rock band," says Head, "whereas Fraternity were a really complex, progressive rock'n'roll band on the level of King Crimson. So we thought Bon was going for a commercial thing. But nobody blamed him, cos we all knew how many years he'd spent struggling, trying to get recognised. We all wished him luck and said: 'Hope it works.' And it did."

As the sun set on Mount Lofty Rangers, it rose for AC/DC.

The Mount Lofty Rangers story doesn't end with Bon Scott's departure. While the singer went on to great things with AC/DC, Head spent the next few years playing sporadic MLR gigs with whichever musicians were available. In 1977, while working as musical director at an arts festival in Adelaide, he staged the bushranger tale *Lofty*, which featured the songs *Clarissa* and *I've Been Up In The Hills Too Long*. (Both were finally recorded for a 2011 album of the musical, released on iTunes and credited to Peter Head & The Mount Lofty Rangers.) But the two tracks Head and Bon laid down back 1974 were lost in the mists of time.

At least they were until 1996, when Head ran into old friend Ted Yanni in a Sydney nightclub. Another face from the Adelaide scene of the late 60s/early 70s, Yanni had also been mates with Bon – his bands the Plastic Tears and Levi Smith's Clefs shared stages with The Valentines and Fraternity. The pair started reminiscing, and Yanni asked Head if he had any recordings from back in the day. Head told him about *Round And Round* and *Carey Gully*. It got Yanni thinking. By now an established producer and sound engineer, he decided to resurrect Scott's vocal on *Round And Round* and update it with a brand new backing track. Calling in favours at studios in Sydney, he stripped Scott's vocals from the two-minute-47-second original and rebuilt it into a slightly longer version, first by re-recording Head's main piano hook, atop of which musician friends laid down the remaining instruments. He then fitted Scott's original vocals to the music, and the song was renamed *Round And Round And Round* to reflect the update.

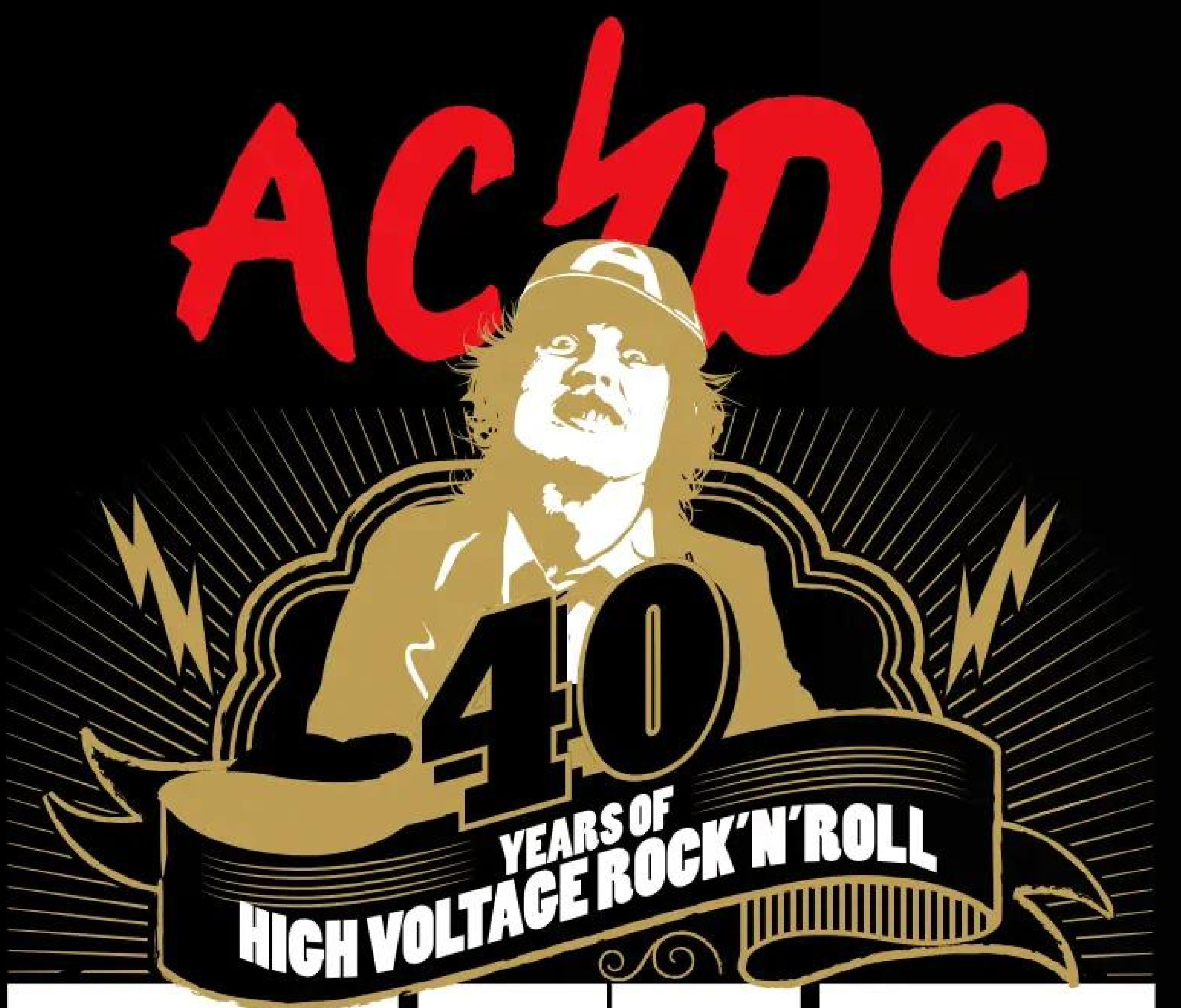
All three songs – *Round And Round And Round*, plus the original versions of *Carey Gully* (to which Yanni added strings) and *Round And Round* itself – were released as an EP in 1996 by Head Office Records. Despite the fact that the songs had never been heard, the EP only sold about 5,000 copies worldwide. There was talk in the mid-90s of trying to get *Round And Round And Round* onto a film soundtrack, but it never transpired.

Still, the songs have recently resurfaced. Head pieced together a film clip for *Round And Round And Round* by cutting together left-over footage of Bon from a 70s TV special on Fraternity to which he'd acquired the rights. Bolstered by backing from Australian label Blue Pie Records, all three tracks have been re-released on iTunes, giving them the opportunity to reach a wider audience.

"It was done with complete love of Bon and his legacy. That's what drove us to put this together," says Yanni. "It was about pooling our resources and showing there was a Bon before AC/DC. And AC/DC were very unhappy about that, because they didn't have rights to the song. Bon did the recording before he signed their contract."

As for what Scott would make of these songs he recorded 40 years ago finally getting a new lease of life. "I think he'd be delighted," says Peter Head. "Because the spirit in which he did it was to help me, cos I'd helped him. And I've never made any money out of music, so if I do out of this I can imagine Bon sitting up there going: 'Finally!'"

The Round And Round And Round EP is available on iTunes.



THE 70s

A New Year's Eve birth... Acid-fried lamb... A shopping centre riot... Rucking with Deep Purple... Broken toilets in a London pub... Jamming with Skynyrd... "Who the fuck's Mutt Lange?"

1973 **THE FIRST GIG!**

LET THERE BE ROCK!

On December 31, 1973, the fledgling AC/DC saw in the New Year by playing their very first gig at a bar in Sydney. Forty years on, the members of that original line-up recall the birth of a legend.

Words: **Johnny Black**

In the early 70s, the Australian music scene was limping like a lame dingo. Slick pop groups peddling three-part harmonies clogged up the charts and the pub scene. But Glasgow-born, Sydney-raised guitarist Malcolm Young wasn't going to let such trivialities stand in the way of his musical dreams. The stubborn 20-year-old enlisted vocalist Dave Evans, bassist Larry Van Kriedt, drummer Colin Burgess and his own 15-year-old brother Angus for a new band named after a label on a vacuum cleaner.

On the last day of 1973, the band made their live debut at Chequers, a dilapidated cabaret bar in Sydney, taking the very first step to superstardom.

Malcolm Young: I got together with a few guys interested in having a jam, and thought, "If I can knock a rock'n'roll tune out of them, we'll get a few gigs and some extra bucks."

Angus Young: Malcolm had been playing on the club circuit, and he said the one thing that was missing was a good, one hundred per cent hard-rock band.

Colin Burgess (drummer): I had been in a very successful Australian band in the sixties called The Masters Apprentices, but we broke up in 1972 so I was at a loose end. A chap called Alan Kissack, who was involved in putting bands together, called me up and told me that Malcolm Young wanted to form a band. Malcolm was the younger brother of George Young, who had been in The Easybeats, Australia's most successful band of the 60s, so I said: "Sure, let's have a go." Even then, Malcolm was very ambitious. He was a hard businessman, wouldn't take no for an answer. We formed the band with Malcolm, myself and Larry Van Kriedt, just a three-piece. Right from the start, it was quite heavy.

Larry Van Kriedt (bass): I was part of the circle of friends of both Mal and Angus. Our main interest and point in common was guitar playing and music. In 1973, I had recently bought a bass and they heard this and wanted me to jam. So I went, and kept going each night after that. We rehearsed a bunch of Mal's tunes and a few covers.

Colin Burgess: We rehearsed above an office building on the corner of Erskineville Road and Wilson Street in Newtown in Sydney. We used to do one Beatles track – *Get Back*. Threw it in just so we could say we did a Beatles track.

Larry Van Kriedt: We had the same room every week on the first floor. Good rehearsals, bad rehearsals, creative moments, sometimes arguments and even fights. It was pretty much Malcolm's vision and he was the driving force behind it.

Colin Burgess: Dave Evans came along a little later, and then Angus.

Dave Evans (vocalist): I'd been with an Australian band called The Velvet Underground, which I must say was not the New York band of the same name. So I saw this ad in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a band looking for a singer in the style of Free and the Rolling Stones, which I was, and when I rang up I found myself speaking to Malcolm Young. We'd never met but we did know of each other. He invited me over that afternoon for a jam, so I went along to this empty office block; it was being renovated.

Angus wasn't in the band yet, so I went in and introduced myself to Malcolm and Colin. It was hot, getting towards summer, and we just jammed on a bunch of songs we all knew. We only did about five or six songs, we were all smiling away, and Malcolm just looked at the other guys and said: "Well, I'm happy if you guys are." Colin and Larry both went "Yep," and I said: "Wow!" We shook

Bon Scott: rock'n'roll outlaw.

REX FEATURES

"I WAS SHOCKED WHEN MALCOLM ASKED ME TO JOIN HIS BAND. I WAS REALLY FRIGHTENED." **ANGUS YOUNG**

hands and that was it. That night we all went out to celebrate that we had a band.

About a week later, Malcolm informed us that his younger brother Angus had a band called Kentuckee, which was breaking up, so could Angus come and audition for us? By this point, we felt like we were a band, so we just said, "Sure."

Colin Burgess: Actually, Malcolm was a very good lead guitarist, so it seemed strange for him to want to bring in another guitarist, like Angus.

Malcolm Young: It was okay, but I felt it needed another instrument – a keyboard maybe, or another guitar.

Angus Young: I was totally shocked when he asked me to play with his band. I hadn't expected it and I was really frightened.

Malcolm Young: Angus was the player, to be honest. He was always the showman of the two of us when we were kids.

Angus Young: I walked through the door, and there was a drummer, and Malcolm goes, "All right, let's start!" And I'm going, "Wait, isn't somebody supposed to count us in?" He says, "What? This is a rock band. Go!" And so that was how it started.

Dave Evans: At that point we became five rather than four. We'd been rehearsing for a couple of months when Malcolm told us Alan Kissack had got us our first gig, at Chequers night club. This was the number one club in Sydney. I'd played a lot of gigs but never Chequers, so that was great.

Gene Pierson (entertainments manager, Chequers): Chequers, traditionally, had been a theatre-restaurant in the 60s where they'd had acts like Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr, Dusty Springfield, Dionne Warwick, and I was brought in at the end of that era. My job was to get in there and change the format, turn it into a rock'n'roll venue, but the old school was still in charge.

The two guys who really convinced me to put the band on at Chequers were their first manager, Alan Kissack, and their roadie, Ray Arnold, both of whom are now dead. Alan was a humble little man with glasses, but he lived and breathed AC/DC. He was convinced they were going to be the biggest band in the world. He and Ray were great gentlemen, much too nice to be in the music industry. It was Alan's perseverance that convinced me to give them a gig.

Dave Evans: The gig was to be on New Year's Eve, the prime time, and there was a lot of interest in the band because Colin Burgess was in it, and the two younger brothers of the famous George Young from The Easybeats. So there was a lot of anticipation, but we didn't even have a name yet.

Colin Burgess: I'd been around the business for years so I had lots of friends. A lot of people knew me, so they assumed the band would be good because they knew I wouldn't have played with any old rubbish.

Dave Evans: The only problem was that we were expected to do two sets, but we didn't have enough songs. We had a couple of originals, but it was mostly Rolling Stones, Free, Eric Clapton, so to get enough songs, Malcolm said he'd start up a riff, I would announce a name for it, and then we'd make it up as we went along. That suited me fine, because when I was about eleven, me and my sister used to make up songs on the spot. We had a game called Hit Parade where we would just throw imaginary song titles at each other and then make them up. So I knew how to do that. Now, though, we had to come up with a name in a hurry.

At the next rehearsal, Malcolm said that his sister had suggested AC/DC, and I really liked it because it was easy to remember and it gave us free advertising on every electrical appliance in the world. In those days we didn't know it had a sexual connotation. I used to hang out with a few gay guys and I'd never heard them using that term. To us, it was just all about electric current.

Paul Close (audience member): At the time of that gig, I was doing sound and staging for artists around the East Coast. I do recall there was quite a vibe building up before they even came in for a soundcheck on the day. Word had been spreading about them. Their manager had got them a Greyhound tour bus to travel in. The equipment, band and crew all travelled together in it. It was quite a sight to see this big, long bus pull into the rear lane behind Chequers to unload.

> *"OUR ATTITUDE WAS THAT WE WERE GOING TO BE THE BEST BAND IN THE WORLD."*
> ***DAVE EVANS***

Dave Evans: It had been very glamorous in the 50s and 60s but when we played there, it was past its heyday. It was a small venue with a little stage, no dressing room. You got dressed either in the kitchen, or in a little alcove just off the side of the stage. The decor was still very 50s. It had the tables with the white tablecloths, and a dancefloor, and half-moon booths where you could sit. You could tell that it must once have been really cool, and it was still the place to be.

Larry Van Kriedt: It was a late-starting gig. They would usually have three bands on one night. We were the first band to play when we played there. I didn't have a bass amp and we would ask one of the other bands if we could use theirs.

Paul Close: The buzz in the air that night was palpable – a full house and the bar was doing a good trade as the industry people all came in to see this new band.

Gene Pierson: I'll never forget, the first song they did was *Baby Please Don't Go*, which had been a hit for Van Morrison's first band, Them. When I stood out the front, it was the first time I'd ever felt the bass and the drums vibrating my chest. They were deeper and louder than anything else I had ever heard.

Colin Burgess: No one was dancing at the start. Then my brother, Paul, who used to drive us around, he was the first one that got up and started to dance. After that everyone else started and from there I knew the band was going to be a success, no doubt about it.

Angus Young: We had to get up and blast away. From the moment 'Go!' it went great. Everyone thought we were a pack of loonies. You know … "'Who's been feeding them kids bananas?"

Dave Evans: Angus didn't have his schoolboy uniform at that stage. We were just in jeans and shirts and stuff. What we did have was absolute energy and a belief in ourselves. Even though we were very young, we were all already professionals. Our attitude was that we were going to be the best band in the world.

Paul Close: They grabbed people by the throat with the high-level energy that has since become their trademark. They were a very tight band that rocked hard, and certainly shook the bubblegum pop people out of their placid little existence.

Dave Evans: Our two sets that night were pretty much a mixture of songs we knew plus a couple of originals, including *The Old Bay Road*, written by Malcolm Young and *Midnight Rockin'*, and the songs we were just making up. No one knew the difference.

Gene Pierson: Peter Casey, the club manager, was an old Greek gentleman who had been running the club in the days of its cabaret-style acts. He pulled the plugs out halfway through a track because he just thought they were too loud. They would get the power back on and twenty minutes later Casey would pull it out again.

Dave Evans: I counted down the New Year for the crowd. Everyone was in a great mood because it was New Year's Eve and the crowd just went off their brains. It was an amazing, fantastic first show, which I will never forget. How could I? It was incredible.

Angus Young: That gig was really wild. It's wild on New Year's Eve anyway but putting what we were doing on top of all the seasonal stuff just made it wilder.

Gene Pierson: After that show, I was able to get them gigs at another important venue, Bondi Lifesavers, and more gigs at Chequers and elsewhere. They developed a big following very quickly. Once Angus got his little school uniform, he was like a man in a trance, and he would climb up on the bars, on the tables, and keep playing the whole time. He was unbelievable. They were like nothing anybody had seen before. ❼

AC/DC: sofa so good.

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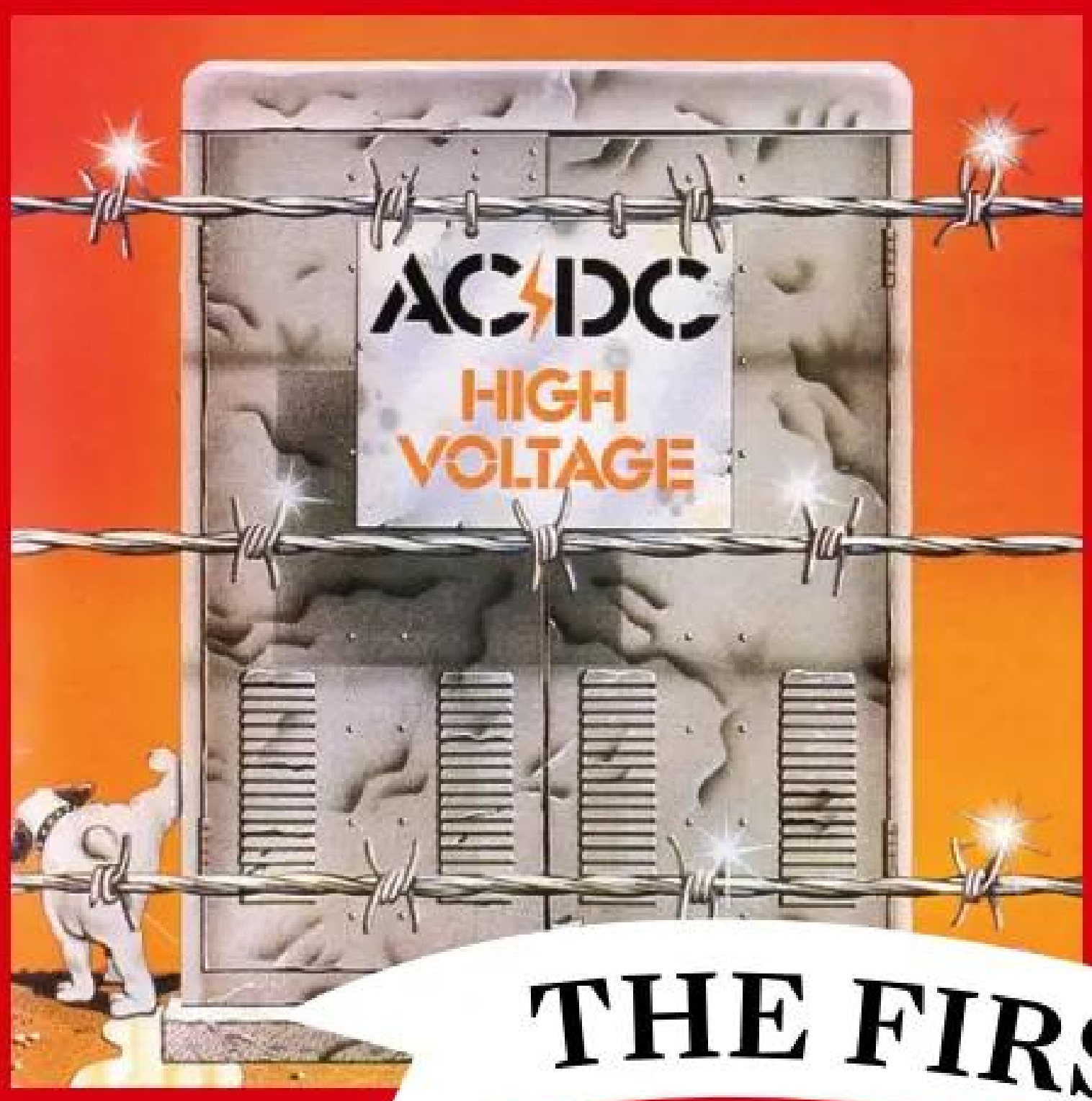
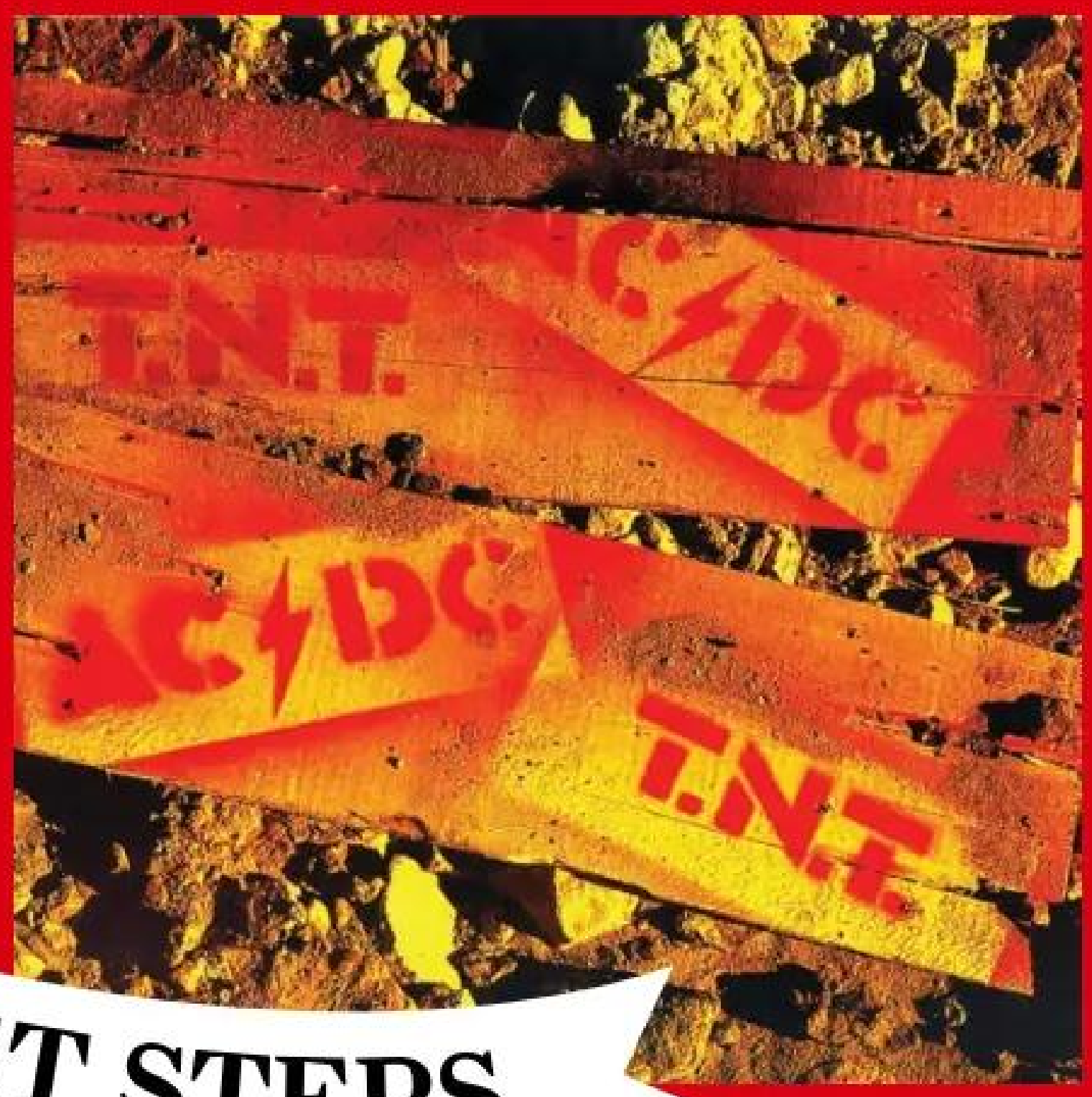
IT'S A LONG WAY TO THE TOP


AC/DC
HIGH VOLTAGE


T.N.T.
AC/DC
AC/DC
T.N.T.

THE FIRST STEPS

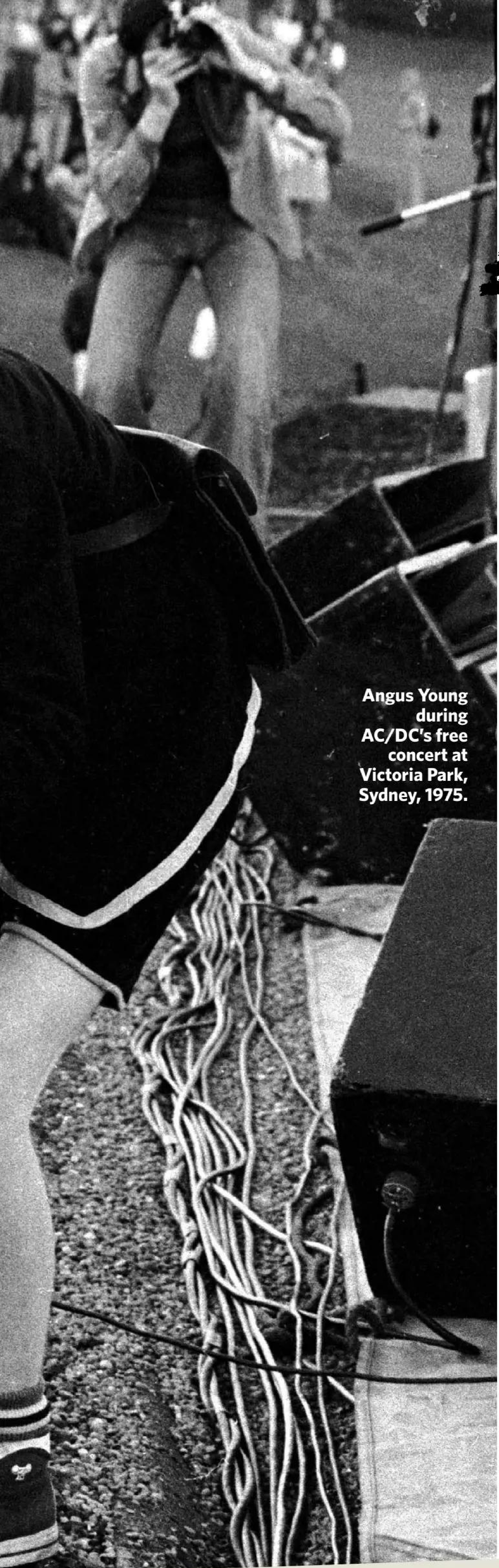
HIGH VOLTAGE 1975

T.N.T. 1975

Released only in Australia the original *High Voltage* wasn't anything special, but follow-up *T.N.T.* put AC/DC on the road to fame and success...

Words: **Jerry Ewing** Photo: **Philip Morris/Rex**

> "MY GOD, THEY KNEW HOW TO PLAY."
>
> **GEORGE YOUNG**



Angus Young during AC/DC's free concert at Victoria Park, Sydney, 1975.

Already earmarked by Ted Albert, the main man behind his father's Albert Music company (Australia's leading independent record label and publishing house), as something special, AC/DC were just a year old when they went into Albert's own studios in Sydney to record their debut album.

Formed in November 1973 by the 20-year old guitarist Malcolm Young, the band had spent a year honing their raw, electrifying rock'n'roll around Australia's notorious hotel circuit. With Malcolm's 18-year old brother Angus on lead guitar and Welsh-born, fellow immigrant Dave Evans as singer, a procession of drummers and bassists had passed through as they searched for a solid line-up.

With Evans, AC/DC had recorded the single *Can I Sit Next To You, Girl* at Albert Studios in early 1974. However, by the time they set to work on their first album, eight months down the line, he'd been replaced by their roadie, Bon Scott. With elder Young brother George helping out on drums and bass when needed (along with his fellow Easybeats band member Harry Vanda, he would also act as producer), as well as the now recognised trio of Young, Young and Scott, sometime members Pete Clack and Tony Currenti played drums and bassist Rob Bailey contributed to some tracks.

With glam rock in the ascendency at the time, it is quite clear that *High Voltage* draws its inspiration from an earlier era. The album cover, featuring a dog urinating over an electricity substation – outrageous upon release to the conservative Aussie press, and ramming home the band's sense of anti-establishment – is a far cry from the album sleeves of their glammier peers such as Skyhooks, Hush and Sherbet. The songs have elemental melodies and the boys' way with a backing chorus suggests that the glam craze had some effect on the young AC/DC, but also present is a strong hint of the blues-based hard rock of Free combined with the chugging early rock'n'roll style, something that would swiftly develop into AC/DC's trademark sound.

Having such varied personnel might go some way to explaining the slightly disjointed feel of *High Voltage* when placed alongside the more assured sequencing of later albums like *Let There Be Rock* or *Powerage*. The newly-formed engine room of Malcolm and Angus Young was central to the sound of the record, the brothers' drive and ambition burning through its nine tracks.

Bon Scott had been the band's singer for just two months, but he already sounded like he'd fronted AC/DC forever. Much of this has to do with Scott's wordplay, a key ingredient of the band's appeal since his time with them, and one that continued to loom over AC/DC following his tragic death in 1980. On their debut he hits high points with a cocksure threesome. The first, the salacious *Little Lover,* was developed from a song that Malcolm had written when he was only 14 years old, to which Scott added his ambiguous lyrics. The second, *Love Song,* was originally known as *Fell In Love*, and was written by Malcolm and Dave Evans. The third is the rollicking *She's Got Balls*, an ode by Bon dedicated to his ex-wife Irene, and probably the standout on the record. Only that and *Little Lover* would make the cut when tracks from the band's first two, Australia-only, albums were combined for an album for international release, confusingly also titled *High Voltage*.

Four months later, and with a No.7 album under their belts, AC/DC were back in Albert Studios in Sydney, working on their next record. George Young and Harry Vanda again looked after the production, but by this time the band's line-up had solidified, with Phil Rudd, formerly of Buster Brown, on drums, and Mark Evans, a pal of the band's road manager Steve McGrath, on bass.

And this new-found sense of stability helped mark the difference between the sound of the band on their debut album, and that which would hit home with much more precision on *T.N.T*, its follow-up. Where *High Voltage* sounded like a band taking their first, albeit still electrifying, steps into the world of rock'n'roll, *T.N.T.* not only sent out a strong signal that here was a band to stay for the long haul, but it also gave every indication that here was a group who just might have what it takes to go all the way to the top; the start of the now well-recognised relentless AC/DC boogie machine.

Much of the material on *T.N.T.* (and subsequently on their international debut *High Voltage*) stands head and shoulders above that on the debut. In just a short space of time the band had already come up with what would prove to be evergreen classics: *It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Want To Rock'n'Roll), The Jack, High Voltage* and the album's title track, all of which have been staples of AC/DC's scintillating live shows over the past four decades.

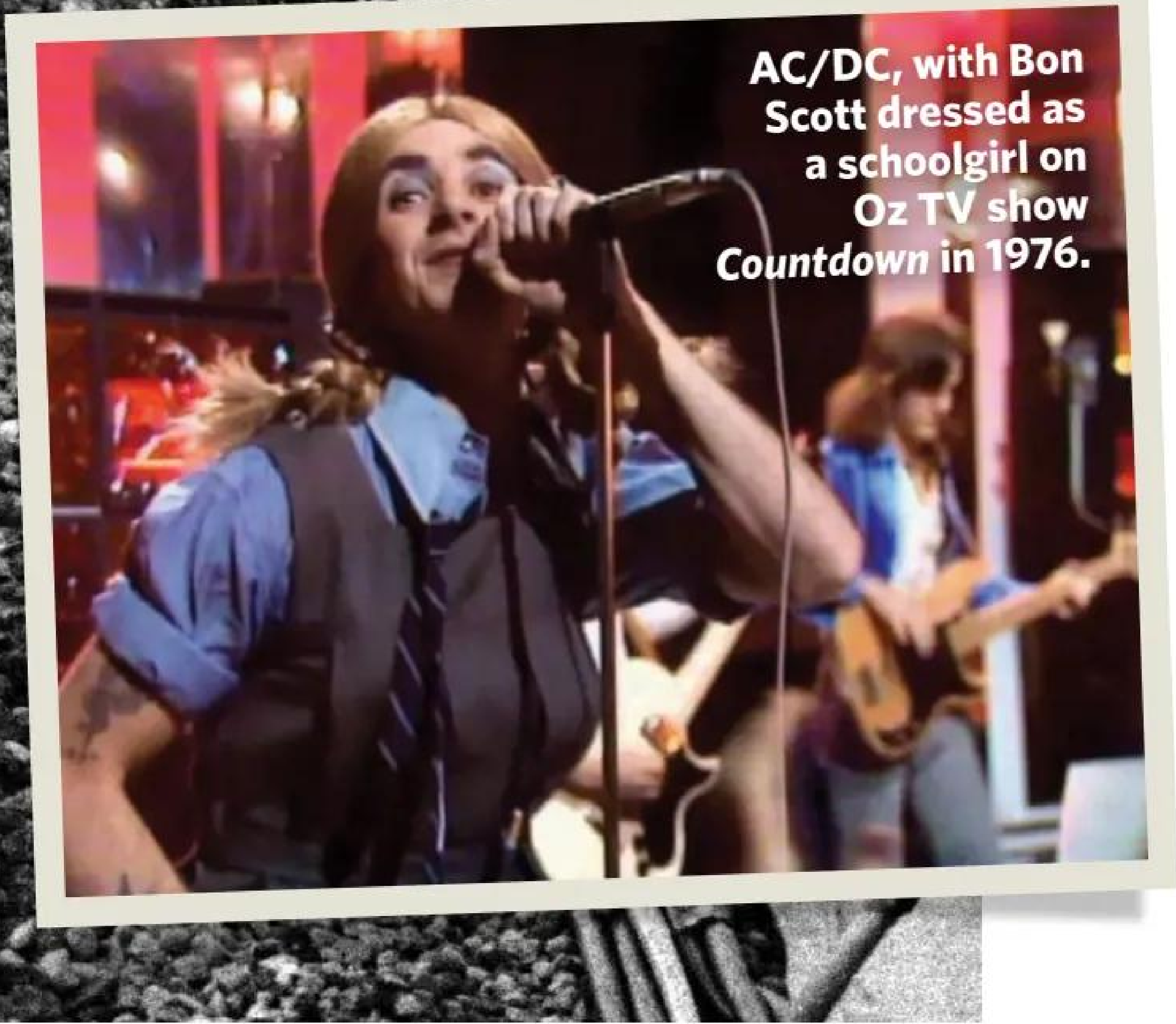
By *T.N.T.*, the sound of AC/DC had shifted away from any of the glam pretensions that might have been evident on *High Voltage*, and built further on the hard-hitting blues-rock approach that would characterise their sound henceforth. A further pointer to the inspiration for their driving rock sound shows in the one cover version that sat alongside eight originals: Chuck Berry's *School Days*.

Whichever way you look at it, *T.N.T.* is far and away above *High Voltage*. It sold much better as well, preceded by two singles: *High Voltage* in July 1975 and *It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Want To Rock'n'Roll)* in December. Both these promotional pushes considerably raised the band's profile in their native Australia. A promotional video for *It's A Long Way To The Top*, featuring the band performing with the Rats Of Tobruk Pipe Band on the back of a truck on Melbourne's Swanston Street, proved immensely popular, as did a performance on Australia's national TV music show *Countdown*, with Bon Scott dressed as a schoolgirl and wearing a blonde wig.

Ironically, *T.N.T.* remains the only AC/DC album released in Australia that doesn't have an international version on Atlantic Records, although all the tracks from it eventually appeared on other international releases. Regardless, it is *the* AC/DC album that set the young band on a duck-walking path to worldwide glory and huge commercial success.

Later, a proud George Young would proclaim of his younger siblings: "All of a sudden the kid brothers were still the kid brothers… but my god, they knew how to play. There was no sort of 'Do they have it or don't they have it?' It was obvious that they had something."

Didn't they just…



AC/DC, with Bon Scott dressed as a schoolgirl on Oz TV show *Countdown* in 1976.

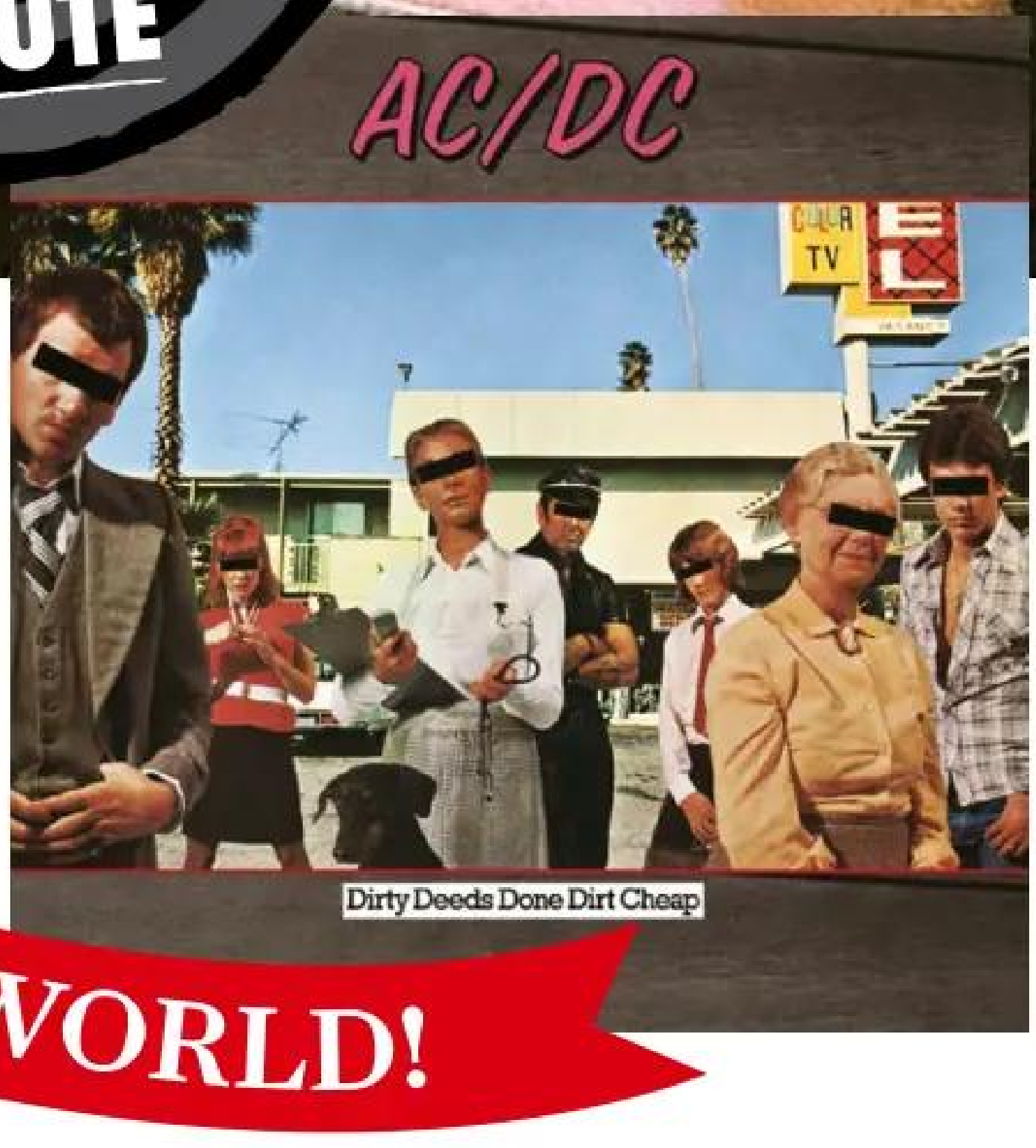
CHEAP T

AC/DC THE FINAL SALUTE

HELLO WORLD!

HIGH VOLTAGE
AC/DC

HIGH VOLTAGE 1976



DIRTY DEEDS DONE DIRT CHEAP 1976

After two Australia-only album releases, it was time to look abroad. A compilation from those two was their first step towards global fame.

Words: **Geoff Barton** Photo: **Alamy**

'Dear Sounds,

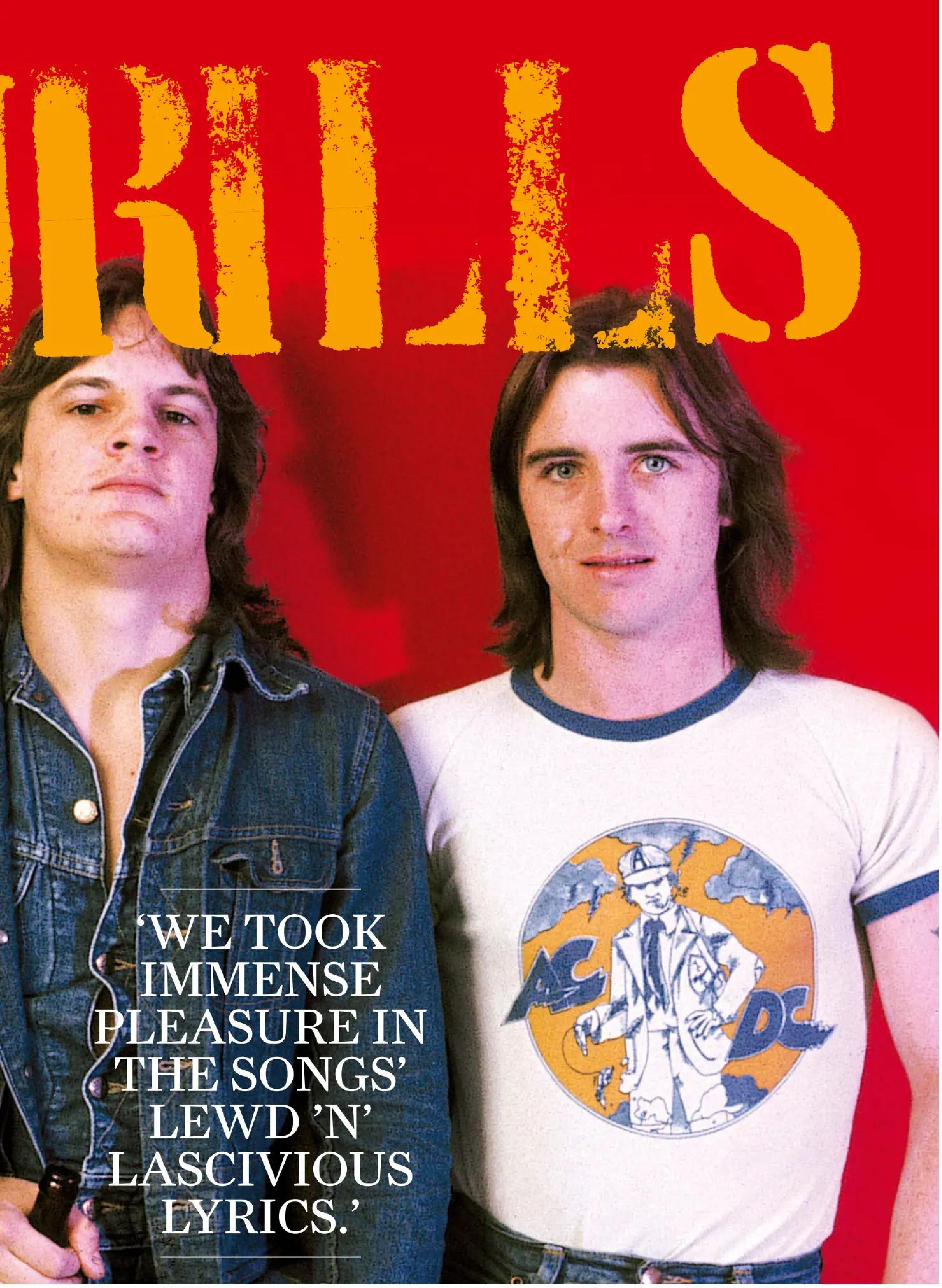
'Whilst scanning your pages over the past few weeks I have come across pictures of a rather delectable-looking creature who goes under the name of Angus Young and who is apparently the lead guitarist with an Aussie rock outfit called AC/DC.

'As an ardent fan of punk rock (and schoolboys), I reckon it to be quite possible that I should appreciate their music and wondered if you could get me any further info on this young man and his sidekicks.

'Surely you're not going to leave me drooling over the photos and not tell me more about Mr Young and co?'
– Jane Hunt, Lowestoft, Suffolk

(Letter published in Sounds, June 12, 1976 edition)

In spring 1976, an elite hit squad of journos from *Sounds* music weekly – including yours truly – was invited to the London offices of Atlantic Records to watch a film in the company's in-house cinema. A film! A real-life motion



> ‘WE TOOK IMMENSE PLEASURE IN THE SONGS’ LEWD ’N’ LASCIVIOUS LYRICS.’

picture! This was heady, exotic stuff. Of course, there were no DVDs, video streams or mpeg files in those days. Not even VHS cassettes. Atlantic treated us to the full-on celluloid experience, complete with old-fashioned reel-to-reel projector chattering away at the back of the room and everything.

Drinks were drunk, smokes smoked and canapés consumed as we watched flickering black-and-white footage of the label’s new signing – a motley posse of so-called “Antipodean punk rockers” – performing to an audience of sozzled swagmen in a tumbledown shack on the outskirts of Melbourne, Australia. The Atlantic bods were hoping we’d be impressed by this seamy spectacle, because they wanted to bring the band over to Britain for a series of *Sounds*-sponsored tour dates.

And were we impressed? Most certainly. We hugely enjoyed the delinquent nature of the infectious, boogie-strewn music; we took immense pleasure in the songs’ lewd ’n’ lascivious lyrics; we greatly admired the bare-chested machismo of frontman Bon Scott, with his missing teeth and battle-scarred demeanour.

But we had a few misgivings. For starters, we reckoned the bisexual connotations of the band’s name – which, we’d learned, was AC/DC – might put people off. (We were journos, not electricians, okay?) We couldn’t the stop the words of a 1974 song by Sweet, coincidentally titled *AC-DC*, from buzzing around in our head: ‘*She got girls/Girls all over the world/She got men/Every now and then…*’ Additionally, we thought the hyperactive schoolkid cavorting about in short trousers – a guitar prodigy called Angus Young, purportedly a mere 16 years old – was a bit of an acquired taste. Finally, apart from the band’s snot-nosed attitude, and the snot on the lapels of Angus’s blazer, we didn’t exactly see where that punk-rock tag came from.

Still, we shook hands with the record company toffs and agreed the basics of what would become the 19-date *Sounds*-AC/DC Lock Up Your Daughters Summer Tour of the UK, to begin on June 11, 1976 at Glasgow’s City Hall and end on July 7 at London’s Lyceum. Admission was £1 – or 50p upon production of a special *Sounds* money-off voucher. Could we have predicted that just a few short years later, these Oz larrikins would be well on their way to becoming the biggest, baddest rock band on the entire planet? Could we heck. At this point they seemed more suited to the compact confines of the Red Cow pub in Hammersmith than the Red Bull Arena…

A month or so prior to our meeting, Atlantic had cherry-picked songs from AC/DC’s two Australia-only albums – *High Voltage* and *T.N.T.*, both of which came out in ’75 – to create a brand new nine-track ‘compilation’. In actual fact, the majority of songs on said offering were from *T.N.T.*, with only two – *Little Lover* and *She’s Got Balls* – from *High Voltage*. Even so, the label elected to reprise the *High Voltage* title for this, AC/DC’s first non-Albert Productions release.

Angus – sticking out his tongue in inimitable style, the point of a bright-yellow lightning bolt seemingly welded to the toe of his right sneaker – featured prominently on the cover of *High Voltage* V2 that most of the world will be familiar with. In Europe, however, it had a different cover image: a garish illustration of Bon and Angus in full flight, the former’s barrel chest bulging like Popeye’s after a marathon spinach bender, the latter depicted as a satchel-slingin’ schoolboy with a gasper in his mouth, on the run from matron’s clutches.

And the music? Well, the estimable Jerry Ewing has already put in his two-penn’orth on the previous pages. Suffice to say that revisiting *High Voltage* for the purposes of this article proved to be an immensely pleasurable experience. The album might be 40-odd years old, but it still crackles with live-wire intensity – pun most definitely intended.

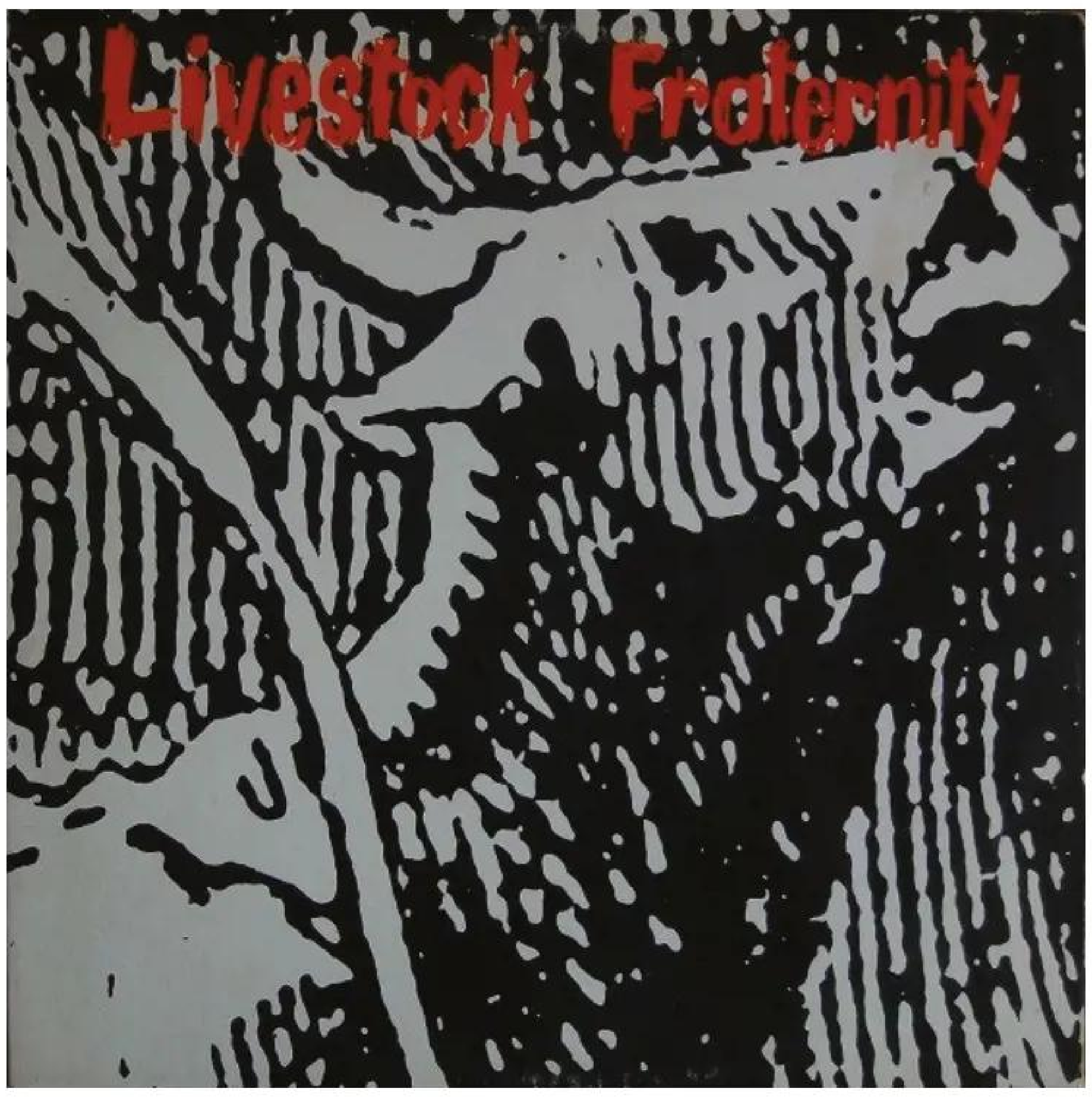
The production, by Harry Vanda and George Young, is crisp and simplistic, in its way every bit as good as Robert John ‘Mutt’ Lange’s more sophisticated knob-twiddlings on later AC/DC diamonds such as *Highway To Hell* and *Back In Black*. And you gotta admire the audacity of including bagpipes on opening track *It’s A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock’N’Roll)*, AC/DC’s Scottish heritage not being widely appreciated at this early point in their career. From *T.N.T*, complete with Scott’s impeccable enunciation of the hookline ‘I’m dyna-*mite*’, via the endearingly sordid *The Jack*, to the libidinous *Can I Sit Next To You Girl*, this was indeed an international debut to savour.

Subtly different versions of follow-up album *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* were issued in Australia and the rest of the world. For the purposes of this piece we’ll concentrate on the latter release, which hit the shops – in the UK at least – late in ’76, complete with cover art by Hipgnosis. Bizarrely, *Dirty Deeds* wasn’t released officially in the US until March ’81, as Atlantic execs there had misgivings about Scott’s gritty vocal style. They also thought songs such as *Squealer*, *Love At First Feel* and *Big Balls* were somewhat crass and tasteless. Which they were. That was the whole goddamn point!

American recalcitrance aside, there’s no getting away from it: *Dirty Deeds* is a tremendous record, arguably Scott’s best with AC/DC. That claim hinges on a song that’s atypical for the band: *Ride On*, the best bluesy ballad you’re ever likely to hear.

Normal AC/DC service is resumed with the ripsnorting title track and the mischievous *Problem Child*. But following Scott’s death in February 1980, the desolate, searching spirit embodied by *Ride On* took on new meaning and significance. And that’s why *Dirty Deeds* will always be about *that* particular song.

1974 BON SCOTT JOINS!



"WE NICKNAMED HIM ROAD-TEST RONNIE. HE TRIED IT ALL"

Pre-AC/DC, Bon Scott was the acid-gobbling, jellyfish-bothering singer with Fraternity. **Former bandmate John Bisset** recalls the man behind the myth.

When I met Bon he had already joined Fraternity. Bruce Howe, our bass player, arranged it – and then told the rest of us about it. I don't remember the exact first meeting, but I remember he sang Vanilla Fudge's *Take Me For A Little While*.

Right from the very first days he always took an interest in my son. My wife and I used to fight a lot, and Bon was one of the few people who tried to help the situation. One of the first things he did, he came around to our flat and did tricks for my son in the back yard – somersaults and things like that – just to bring some cheer to our family group.

The last six months or so that we were in Australia before Fraternity moved to England, he shared a house with us in Adelaide. I didn't take note of any personal habits, but he did sit alone and play the recorder quite a bit. We did an awful lot of drinking and partying. That was our favourite pastime. Bon was ambitious, but it didn't take predominance over having a good time.

Bon loved that lifestyle. We nicknamed him Road-Test Ronnie; if someone came along with some new acid or new dope, he was game to give it all a try. He wasn't a hippie though, that's a bit of a misunderstanding. There was a lot of vegetarianism around in those days, a lot of the acid culture went that way, but even on an acid trip you'd see him chomping on a leg of lamb.

Bon tended to make friends wherever he went. We did a tour of country towns in South Australia. In one town there was a big pier, and kids were daring Bon to jump off it because a swarm of jellyfish had come in. Bon nonchalantly climbed to the highest point of the pier and bombed right into them. I don't think he got stung at all.

After I left Fraternity in 1973 I didn't see Bon again until, I think, 1978. I went back to Adelaide and went to Fraternity harmonica player Uncle's [John Ayers] place and Bon was there. I heard Bon was getting picked on in pubs. It was one of the prices of fame – he used to enjoy going to the pub and making friends, but that was all a thing of the past. Now there were stupid, jealous guys who just wanted to beat him up.

The last time I saw Bon was when AC/DC were in London in 1979, and Bon said he'd leave five tickets at the Hammersmith Odeon for me. Afterwards I went around behind the Odeon and by chance Bon came to the backstage door. He invited me in for a drink. He was just the same. He was still friendly, and he introduced me to Angus Young. Then their manager came and rounded them up and put them in a limo, and I stood and waved as they drove off. That was the last time I saw Bon.

40 YEARS OF HIGH VOLTAGE ROCK'N'ROLL

1975 AC/DC IN OZ!

IT'S A LONG WAY TO THE TOP...

...if you wanna rock'n'roll. And in Australia, AC/DC were taking the first steps up that ladder. Cue riots, dust-ups and urine-filled turkeys.

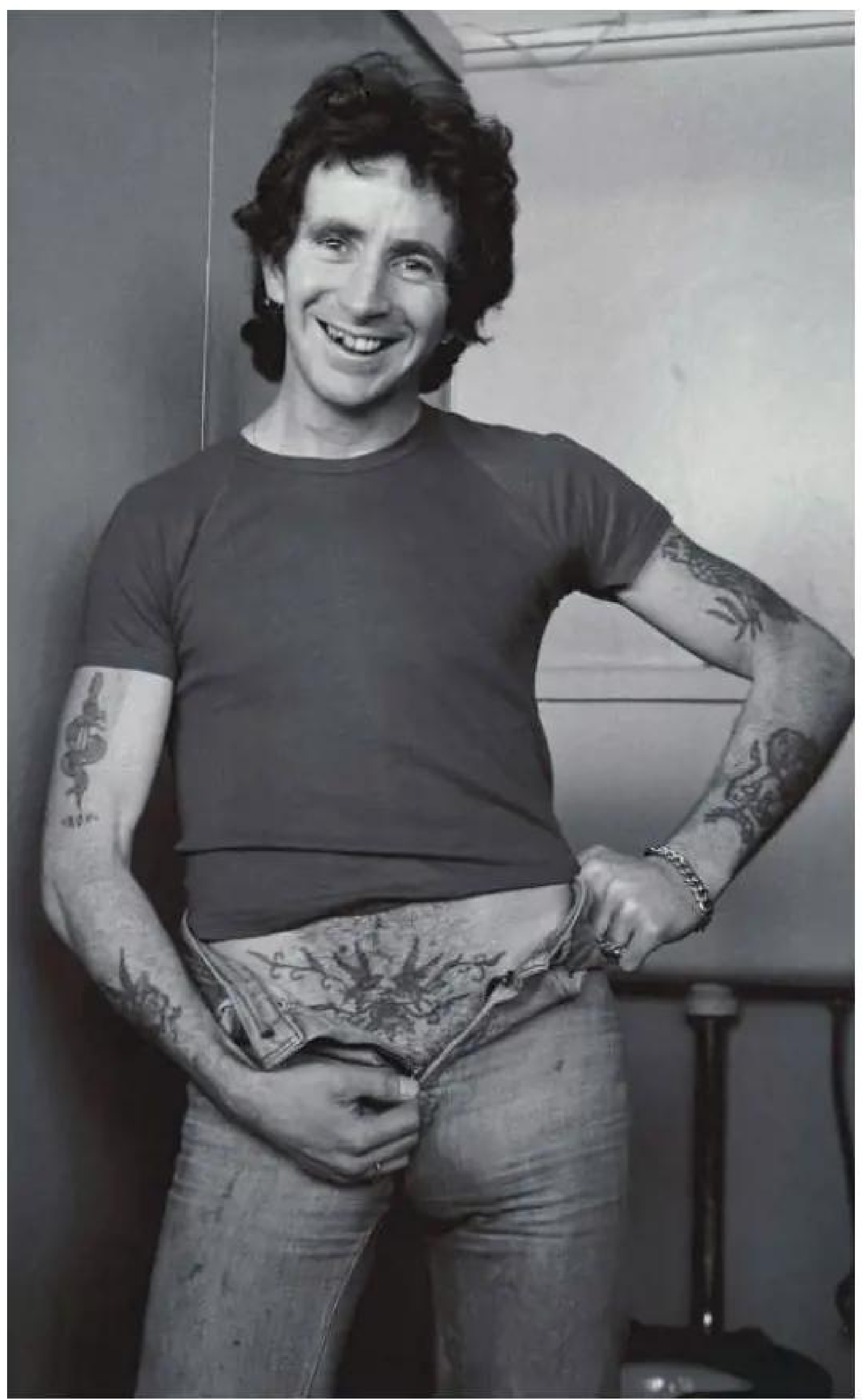
Words: **Murray Engleheart**

Angus Young was sitting at the back of AC/DC's tour bus when a local Australian promoter climbed aboard and plonked himself down a few seats away. It was December 1975, and the promoter wanted to chat about the band's stellar rise in their homeland over the past 12 months.

As the promoter talked, the 20-year-old guitarist remained silent, making the conversation decidedly one-sided. The reason for Angus's poker face became apparent after a few minutes when a young female fan, who had been kneeling out of sight in front of him, suddenly appeared. Shooting the promoter a withering look, she casually made her way off the bus.

If nothing else, the young lady was living, breathing, head-turning proof that this skinny kid in a schoolkid's uniform and his no less rough-arsed bandmates were finally proper rock'n'roll stars in Australia.

> *"I HAD AC/DC, MY ROAD CREW, GEORGE YOUNG AND MYSELF IN A MAJOR BRAWL WITH DEEP PURPLE'S CREW AND MANAGER."*
> ***MICHAEL BROWNING***


GRAEME WEBBER

AC/DC had begun 1975 as scrappy underdogs. They may have found the perfect frontman a few months earlier in Bon Scott, but they were still finding their feet and their audience. After a year of playing in Sydney, the band's new manager, Michael Browning, decided that a change of scenery was needed. Browning relocated the band to Melbourne, a few hundred miles away.

Melbourne had been the centre of the Australian music scene in the late 60s and early 70s. Its crowds were hard, broken-nosed bruisers who worshipped the raw, mega-watted power of such tough bands as Billy Thorpe And The Aztecs and Lobby Loyde & The Coloured Balls. The city's tough spirit and attitude mirrored AC/DC's own. It was a perfect match.

Browning found the band a house in Lansdowne Road, St Kilda – the city's red-light district. Unsurprisingly, there was a brothel nearby. It quickly became party central for the band and locals alike. The police were regular visitors, until they worked out that partying was the occupants' sole 'crime', and became more interested in whether they could play some of the instruments strewn about the place than in executing search warrants.

In January, new drummer Phil Rudd joined the band after a jam in the hallway at Lansdowne Road with everyone in their underwear. Three weeks later, AC/DC – with Angus and Malcolm Young's brother George on bass – drove to the outskirts of Melbourne to play the Sunbury festival in front of 45,000 people.

Set up in 1972 as Australia's Woodstock, Sunbury was more about beer down throats than flowers in hair. Deep Purple topped the bill in 1975, although the locals weren't going to give them an easy time. Billy Thorpe pulled in every spare amp in Melbourne to sonically outdo the headliners.

But a volume war wasn't the only battle at the event, after AC/DC discovered they were due to play in the early hours after Purple had stripped the stage of their gear. They weren't impressed. Michael Browning gave the order to attack, and Bon and the Young brothers' pit-bull genes kicked into action.

"I had AC/DC, my road crew, George Young and myself in a major brawl with all of their crew and manager," recalled Browning. "A full-on brawl in the middle of the stage."

When the dust had settled, the band packed up and drove back to Melbourne without having played a note. A peace-making offer to perform the following day was less than politely declined. AC/DC had made their point.

In February, AC/DC released their debut album, *High Voltage*, on the Albert label. It had been recorded the previous November in Sydney, after the band had opened for Black Sabbath at the Hordern Pavilion, and produced by Harry Vanda and Angus and Malcolm's elder brother George Young, the former Easybeats duo who would produce every AC/DC album up to *If You Want Blood You've Got It*. At this point the band had no fixed rhythm section, so George Young and Rob Bailey shared the bass playing, while Tony Currenti, of The 69ers, did most of the drumming.

The album's front cover was a statement of intent: a cartoon dog pissing on an electrical sub-station, while a pair of crushed and discarded beer cans were a visual call to arms for an underclass of rock fans who were sick to death of the intellectual glam of Skyhooks and the bubblegum teen pop of Sherbert, the two biggest home-grown bands of the time.

The music on *High Voltage* was no less in-your-face, not least *She's Got Balls*, a song about Bon's ex-wife. Ironically, the first single was the one track on the album that didn't have balls, the hippyish, hearts-and-flowers *Love Song (Oh Jene)*. Tellingly, it was the rollicking cover of Big Joe Williams's *Baby, Please Don't Go* on the B-side that people picked up on instead.

It was the latter song that AC/DC were invited to perform on TV show *Countdown* a month later, by which time they'd brought in 18-year-old bassist Mark Evans (who had unwound after his audition by getting into a fight with a bouncer at a nearby pub). *Countdown* was a tame Sunday evening teen pop show, presented by Ian 'Molly' Meldrum. Little did he know that his Sunday evening was about to be upended.

The band ran through the song at rehearsals, then Bon disappeared. Only at the last possible minute, as taping was about to begin, did he re-emerge – dressed as a schoolgirl.

"Bon thought: 'Well, if we come along and be who we are, he [Meldrum] will just walk away [thinking], 'Oh yeah,

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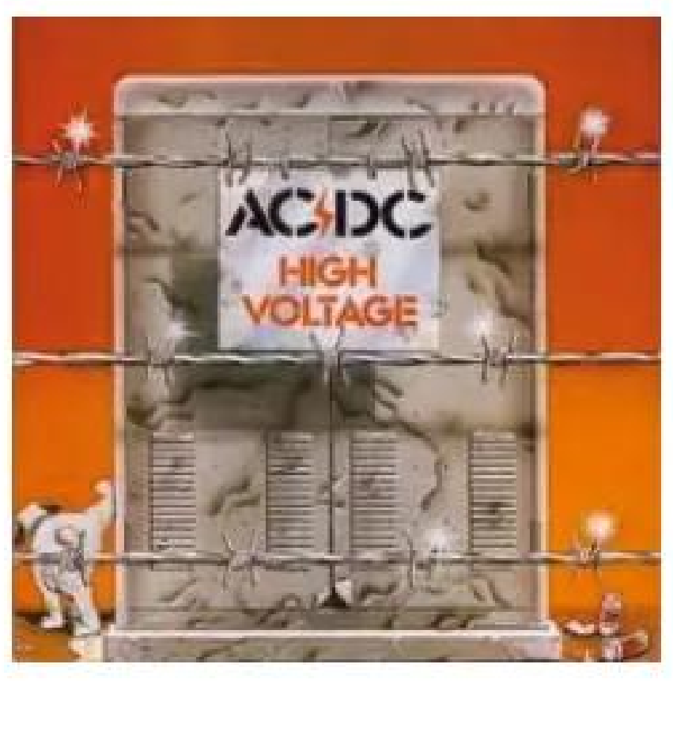
WEA/ULLSTEIN/GETTY

Above: playing Sydney's Victoria Park, Sept. 1975.

Left: Bon Scott shows off his 'ink'.



Don't look down: Angus risks life and limb for rock'n'roll.

BOB KING/GETTY

ho hum,'" recalled Angus. "But when Bon showed up like that, he just went nuts."

Australia had been put on notice that there was a great rock'n'roll band in their midst. Subsequent appearances on *Countdown* only raised AC/DC's profile. Suddenly doors were opening that had been closed up to that point. The band were invited to play at Melbourne's Festival Hall, alongside arty-farty types Split Enz and headliners Skyhooks. AC/DC were always going to stand out on such a highbrow bill, but Bon wanted to ensure their set would be remembered.

"He got a rope and swung across the PA system," said Angus. "He cleared it [at rehearsals]. Then when we were doing the gig, he forgot that all the kids were going to stand on their chairs and he went straight into the crowd. They tore all his clothes off."

In June 1975, *High Voltage* was certified gold. Such was AC/DC's growing success that they were able to move out of Landsdowne Road into the Freeway Gardens Motel, a slightly better class of establishment for the ongoing debauchery. (It was there that Bon met a huge, red-headed Tasmanian woman named Rosie. But that's another story entirely.)

Despite all this, AC/DC were still way below the likes of Skyhooks and Sherbert on the ladder of success. Their turf was still Melbourne, and the character-building grind of up to four gigs a day, seven days a week. Malcolm and Angus took it on the chin, unshakeable in their belief that the big time was within their grasp. The band's live shows were ferocious, with Angus leaping fearlessly into audiences and forcibly making floor space for himself by spinning madly in a circle while lying on his side, turning souped-up Chuck Berry licks into dense sheets of sound.

In late August they were booked to play a series of four lunchtime concerts at the Myer department store in the heart of Melbourne. Thousands arrived for the first show, and the event was shut down after two songs. In just a few minutes, the place had been wrecked and thousands of dollars' worth of merchandise had been stolen.

They may have lost out on a lucrative engagement, but the carnage was AC/DC's coronation in Melbourne. A free concert in Sydney a few weeks later, promoted with a radio ad featuring the punchline "AC/DC – they're not a nice band" was an ear-ringing success, and another city fell under the wheels of their speeding juggernaut.

Natural-born brawlers, it was inevitable that AC/DC would clash with rival bands. In October they grudgingly played *High Voltage* at the King Of Pop awards. In the backstage hospitality area, Bon filled a turkey with champagne and guzzled it down. A few minutes later, Sherbert singer Daryl Braithwaite walked into the room and accepted Bon's offer of a few swigs from the turkey – not knowing that the AC/DC man had just pissed into the bird.

In November 1975, just over a year after Scott joined the band, AC/DC began their first national tour. It would stretch through to the following January. During that time they released the landmark, bagpipe-led single *It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock'N'Roll)*. The title was pulled straight from Bon's lined exercise book.

"He called it toilet poetry," said Angus, "but it definitely was an art form, and he took pride in that."

The song was taken from their second album, *TNT*. Released in late December, it heralded the real arrival of AC/DC. Unlike their slightly premature debut, this record had an identity and a singular focus. As well as the cautionary tale of *It's A Long Way To The Top*, it also covered on-the-job training (*Rock 'N' Roll Singer*) and the occupational pitfalls along the way (*The Jack*). It also definitively established Bon Scott's persona via *Live Wire, The Rocker* and the title track.

T.N.T.
AC/DC
AC/DC
T.N.T.

One of those who was impressed by the album was Phil Carson, head of Atlantic Records in the UK, who signed the band to a worldwide deal on the back of it.

The promotional campaign for *TNT* included a pair of red underpants sent to the media, with a black-and-white sign over the crotch that read: 'Dynamite?' It perfectly encapsulated manager Michael Browning's bad-boy marketing principle. Moreover, it worked, cementing the band's position as Australia's number-one hellraisers.

Not that they were content to cosy up to the press. At a reception to celebrate the sales of their two albums, the band spent much of the evening looking for Al Webb, a journalist for *Juke* magazine who had written a less than complimentary piece. Webb's colleague, Frank Peters, spent the night trying to avoid the lynch mob. Eventually Malcolm cornered him. Grabbing Peters's shirt, the guitarist informed him that he was "fucking lucky" that he wasn't Webb.

Fittingly, AC/DC's breakthrough year ended with fireworks, albeit the wrong kind. The band were due to play a New Year's show in Adelaide. Through no fault of their own, they took the stage late and the power was cut. *Countdown* host Molly Meldrum handed Bon his bagpipes, and the singer was carried on a fan's shoulders into the crowd – who then trashed the stage.

The past 12 months had been a huge success for AC/DC. But as they looked out at the chaos, they knew that Australia still felt like a small and restrictive place. Within a few weeks they were ready to board a plane bound for Britain. ❼

"BON GOT A ROPE AND SWUNG ACROSS THE PA SYSTEM. HE WENT STRAIGHT INTO THE CROWD. THEY TORE ALL HIS CLOTHES OFF." **ANGUS YOUNG**

Murray Engleheart's book AC/DC: Maximum Rock And Roll is available now via Aurum Press.

1976 AC/DC IN BRITAIN!

LOCK UP YOUR DAUGHTERS!

In April 1976 AC/DC played their very first UK gig at a pub in West London. *Classic Rock*'s **Malcolm Dome** was in the front row.

DICK BARNATT/GETTY

The Red Cow was an unpretentious West London boozer-cum-venue, with a reputation for supporting young bands. The action took place at the back of the pub, in a sweatbox of a room with an official capacity of 250 and toilets that were in a constant state of disarray due to a stream of people clambering in through the windows to avoid paying to get in. It was here, on April 1, 1976, that AC/DC played their very first show outside Australia.

At the time, the British music scene was in a state of flux. Pub rock was thriving, though punk was beginning to assert itself. A look at the Red Cow's listings for April 1976 shows what was going on at the grass-roots level: Bees Make Honey, among the best of the pub rockers, were playing, as were Ian Dury & The Blockheads. Some gigs cost 50p to get into, others were free.

AC/DC's British debut was one of the latter. Their two albums, *High Voltage* and *TNT*, were only available on import in the UK and any buzz was confined to the country's more clued-up rock fans. The band may have been stars back home in Oz, but there was work to be done overseas.

Their label, Atlantic, knew it had to start small. They put the band in a shared house in Richmond, South London, which would be their base for the next few months. And it was why they'd booked the low-key Red Cow for their first UK gig.

As was standard, the band played two sets, with a brief interlude in between. Before the first set, their prospects looked unpromising. Barely 30 people were in the back room – a mix of fledgling punks, student types and the odd long-hair, the usual mix for the time. Nobody really knew what to expect as the band ambled on stage. Angus was instantly the focus of attention. Word was out that he dressed as schoolboy, but tonight he actually *looked* like a 12-year-old who had skipped homework to play.

As soon as they launched into *Live Wire*, all bets were off. The set was short – just seven songs – but it was instantly obvious that the band were a cut above the usual pub rock fodder. Afterwards Bon came to the bar, chatting to a few of us who had hung around. He even bought everyone a drink – or rather got them gratis from the bemused barman – then disappeared with two girls.

By the second set, word had got around and the place was packed. The band clearly thrived on the audience's buzz, and their own energy levels rose even further. By the end, any worries about Britain being a tough nut to crack had evaporated.

Such a flying start gave the band a huge injection of confidence. Later that month, they embarked on the legendary Lock Up Your Daughters pub tour, complete with nightly Angus lookalike competitions. They spent most of 1976 on the road, graduating to small theatres and halls, such as the Lyceum Ballroom in London. The interest around them snowballed, helped by the fact that they attracted the attentions of both punk and metal fans.

The band's last UK gig of that year was in Oxford on November 15, after which they returned to Australia for a triumphant homecoming tour. The naysayers who had said they'd come back with their tails between their legs had been proved wrong. The only way for AC/DC from here was up.

1977 AC/DC MEET SKYNYRD

"WE PARTIED DOWN."

One hot day in 1977, AC/DC and Lynyrd Skynyrd jammed together in a Jacksonsville, Florida practice room. Skynyrd guitarist **Gary Rossington** recalls their mutual admiration society.

Lynyrd Skynyrd: jammed with AC/DC on *Sweet Home Alabama.*

CHRIS WALTER/PHOTOFEATURES

We all loved AC/DC, so when they played in Jacksonville we went to the show, of course. After the show we met 'em backstage and had a few drinks – you know how it goes. With all bands there's a rivalry, but when we met those guys we really hit it off. We were kind of alike – ratty little guys with attitude.

I don't remember if Allen Collins, our guitarist, and Ronnie Van Zant, our singer, were with us. Those guys had kids then, so they stayed home a lot. But Leon Wilkeson, our bass player, was single. So was I. We liked having a good time. And after I went home to this new house I just bought, Leon showed up and he'd brought the guys from AC/DC with him. The house was on a river and had a long dock, and we all went out there and got drunk and barely made it back in. We talked and talked till daylight. We just partied down, man. And the next day we took 'em to see the little studio we just had built, a practice room about the size of a two-car garage. I think all of the guys from both bands were there. So we ended up jamming with them, and Kevin Elson, our mixing guy, recorded it. I don't know what happened to that tape but I'd love to hear it now. We might have jammed on *Sweet Home Alabama*, I think.

Jamming with them was so cool. Both bands had really just made it and we were celebrating all that hard work. We were both big-drinking bands, as everyone knows from the stories. So yeah, we tied it on.

Ronnie and Bon Scott had a great mutual respect. Not just for singing but for writing. They were great storytellers. The way they both wrote was so simple and yet so cool.

When Bon died, that was such a bummer. The same thing had happened to us with Ronnie. It was horrible. It changes everything. The singer's the frontman – that's the band, in people's eyes. We got Ronnie's brother, Johnny, because he sounded like him and looked like him and he was part of the family. And for AC/DC, they were hurtin' when Bon died. But they found a guy to replace him and it worked out great, God bless them.

I wish we could do a gig together now. That would be such fun. I wish they would read this and call. We had a blast with them. We were the same kind of band – they were cocky Australians, we were cocky southern rebels. Those were some good times.

W
Jane Birkin

AC/DC 1976: *Let There Be Rock* promo shoot, Shepperton Studios (note 'DC poster stuck over Zep poster).

LET THERE BE LIGHT! LET THERE BE SOUND!

LET THERE BE Rock!

When **AC/DC**'s career stalled at the end of '76, they were "seriously fucking pissed off". They responded in utterly explosive fashion…

Words: **Mick Wall**
Portrait: **Martyn Goddard**

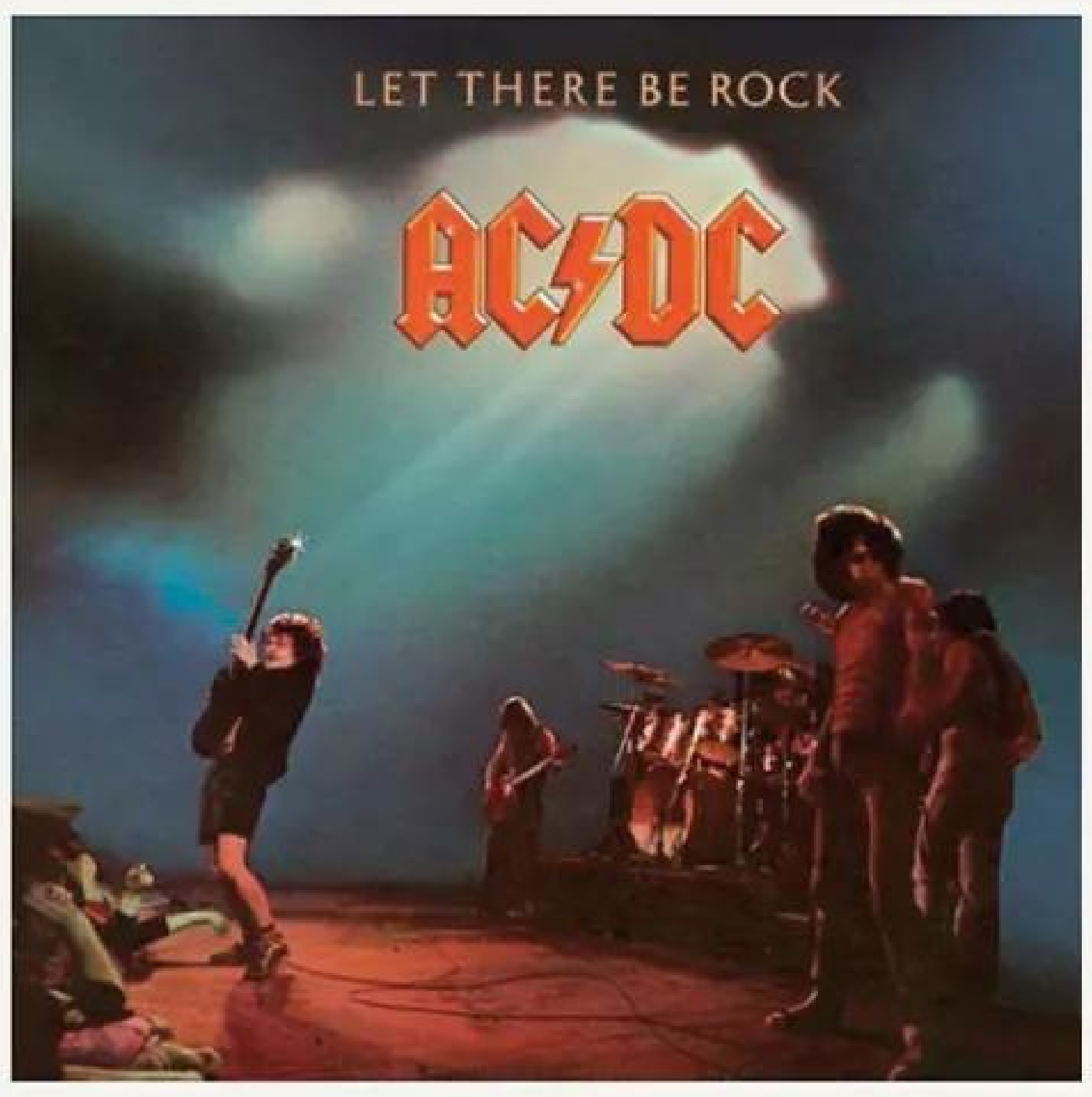
Christmas, 1976, summer time in Australia and, according to Michael Browning, their manager, AC/DC "have got the shits". What's more, they reckon it's all his fault.

"It was very close to being all over," Browning says. "Things were progressing very well in London and Europe. We'd been through a whole thing with the Marquee where they broke all the house records. We'd done the Lock Up Your Daughters UK tour and the Reading festival. It was all shaping up really well."

Having moved the band and their operation to London over the previous eight months – during which time their first UK album release, *High Voltage*, had served warning on an unsuspecting British music scene of the impending explosion of Antipodean rock coming their way – the band's sudden absence from the domestic scene in Australia had left AC/DC's live following there diminished. When Browning brought them back to Oz at the end of 1976 for what should have been a triumphant homecoming, they were surprised to discover that things had changed.

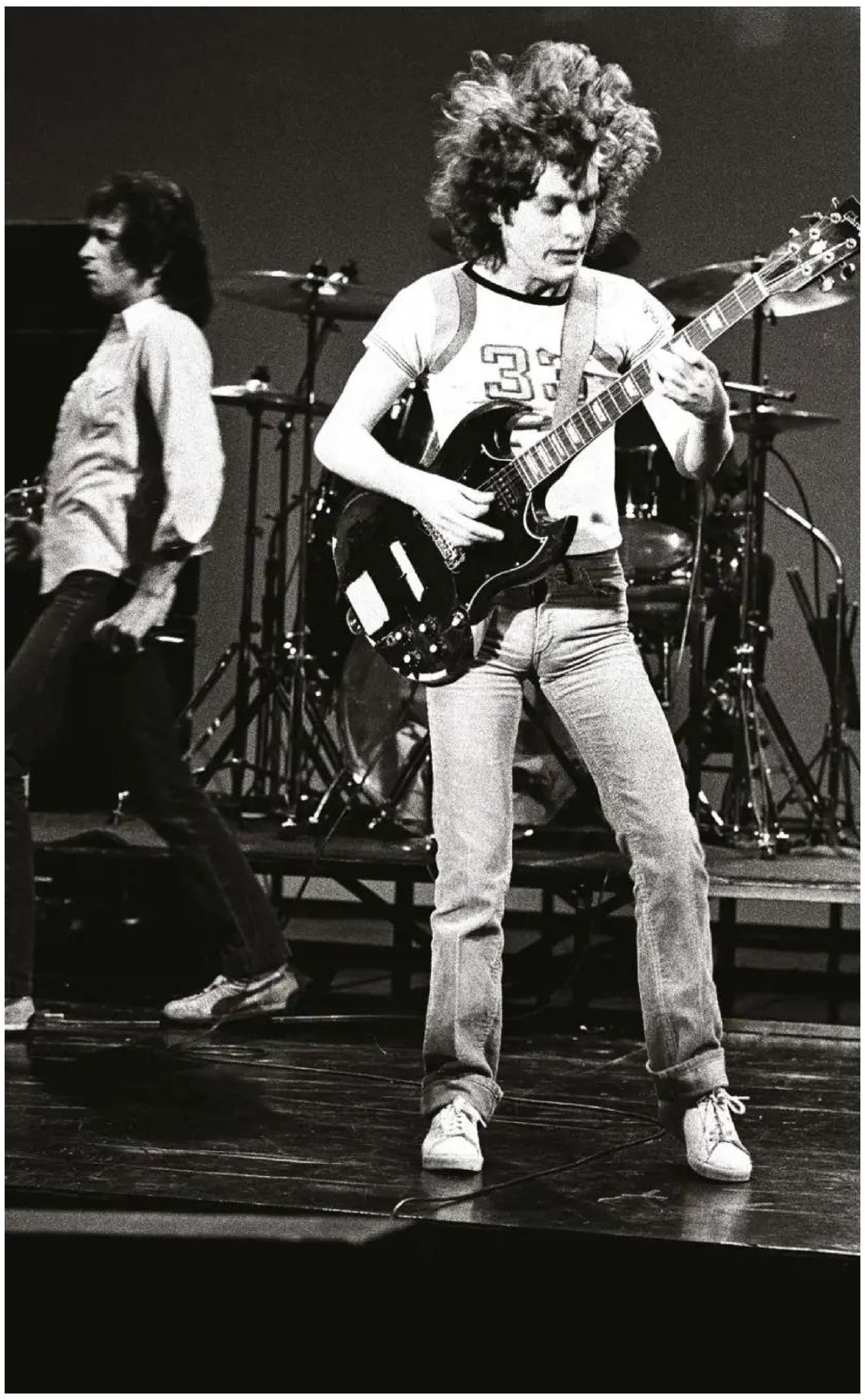
The young, mostly female crowd that had got to know them through regular appearances on TV shows like *Countdown* (the Australian equivalent of *Top Of The Pops*) had deserted them in favour of stay-at-home poptastic local heroes like Skyhooks. Even the rugged, gig-going blokes who populated the thriving pub and club scene that AC/DC now found themselves back playing had developed a certain grudging attitude towards a band that had "buggered off overseas", as Browning puts it. Even their hometown crowd in Sydney was diminished: when, after their return home, the band headlined the 5,000-capacity Hordern Pavilion on December 12, the place was barely half-full.

"It was a tough tour," Browning says. "The group didn't want to be doing it. I copped a lot of shit for making them do it. But it was a financial necessity. We had to do it to fill the coffers up to keep doing what we were doing in England and Europe. But try explaining that to a young rock'n'roll band."



"Our grassroots guys stayed with us," says AC/DC's then-bassist Mark Evans. "But we got banned from a lot of gigs too. Angus was dropping his shorts, and we had a problem with the tour programme where there was a quote on top of my photograph which said: 'I want to make enough money so I'll be able to fuck Britt Ekland.' That nearly derailed the whole tour."

It wasn't all gloom. AC/DC's had released their second album, the wonderfully alliteratively titled *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, in the UK (it was their third in Australia), and while the band had yet to get a sniff at the charts in Britain, ➜



Rehearsing in Hollywood, 1977.

GETTY

back home it had raced into the top five. Although even then guitarist and de facto band leader Malcolm Young found cause for complaint: their previous Australian album, *T.N.T.*, had gone to No.1, why hadn't *Dirty Deeds*? What was wrong with everyone? But there was worse to come.

"In the middle of the tour, I get a phone call saying Atlantic Records in America didn't like the *Dirty Deeds* album," says Browning. "That, in fact, they were going to drop the group from the label. And that's when things got really bad."

And it had all been going so well up until then. Formed in Sydney by the guitar-playing Young brothers – Malcolm and younger sibling Angus – three years previously, AC/DC had survived serial line-up fluctuations, dodgy gigs in the outback where the punters showed their appreciation by hurling bottles at them, even image changes (the idea of Angus wearing a school uniform came from their mercifully brief glam period) to finally emerge triumphant in 1975 with the release in Oz of their first two, chart-bossing albums, *High Voltage* and *T.N.T.*

By then the brothers also had found the perfect frontman: Bon Scott, whose previous career had included forays into pop stardom with The Valentines (the 60s Oz equivalent of a boy band), hairy hippiedom with Fraternity (the Oz equivalent of The Band, at least in their own dope-smoked minds), and several months in jail as a teenager for fighting policemen and stealing cars (and unlawful carnal knowledge with a teenage girl).

Bon was once jokingly asked whether he was the AC or DC in the band. His reply was telling: "Naw, I'm the flash in the middle." Shirtless, strutting, grinning like a wolf, his arms covered in tattoos, Bon was more than just the singer, he was the storyteller – all his best songs came from real life. "As soon as Bon came along you had the real AC/DC," says Browning.

Suitably encouraged, AC/DC did what all aspiring Australian rockers had tried to do since The Easybeats (who included elder Young brother George on guitar) showed them the way when they took over the UK singles chart in the mid-60s with *Friday On My Mind*: they got the hell out of Australia.

"From the very first day I got the job in AC/DC, I was told we would be in the UK within the next 12 months," recalls Mark Evans. "I thought they were dreaming. But, sure enough, that's exactly what happened."

But their initial burst of momentum hit a wall at the end of '76, when they returned to Australia for the tour that would prove to be their rudest awakening yet.

"They'd delivered *Dirty Deeds* before they went back, which I thought was pretty good," says Phil Carson, the London-based chief executive of Atlantic Records and the man who signed the band to the label. "I got Hipgnosis to do a cover for me on the cheap – a reject of somebody else's cover. But the Atlantic A&R department [in the US] said: 'We're sorry, but this album actually doesn't make it. We're not gonna put it out and we're dropping the band.' And everybody was unanimous in this, by the way – everybody."

Unable to see how this raw, still unknown young band was going to fit into the formats of the American radio stations then gorging on the soft rock sound of Rod Stewart, Elton John, The Eagles and Fleetwood Mac, even when Carson pointed out how well the international version of *High Voltage* had done in Britain and Europe, Atlantic's New York boss, Jerry Greenberg, was adamant.

"So I said: 'I think you're making a very, very big mistake'," recalls Carson. "But the drop notice was out; they were history. So I went to Neshui [Ertegun, co-owner of Atlantic with brother Ahmet] and showed him the sales figures that we'd got for *High Voltage*. They were not awe-inspiring but considering we'd only paid $25,000 for the album this was not so bad. There were 10,000 sold in Germany and 12,000 in England. Maybe it had sold 40,000 overall. It had certainly earned its $25,000 back. Neshui backed me up and I re-signed the band at that point. I managed to claw it back in. Thank God I did."

Despite their precarious position, the band were typically bullish in their refusal to bow to the label. There was no question of them softening their sound to make it more palatable to the American market.

"No, no," says Browning. "Malcolm's attitude was the opposite. Total disregard for what Americans think. That's been their attitude all the way along, which is what's made them so sustainable and huge, just never ever really compromising in situations like that."

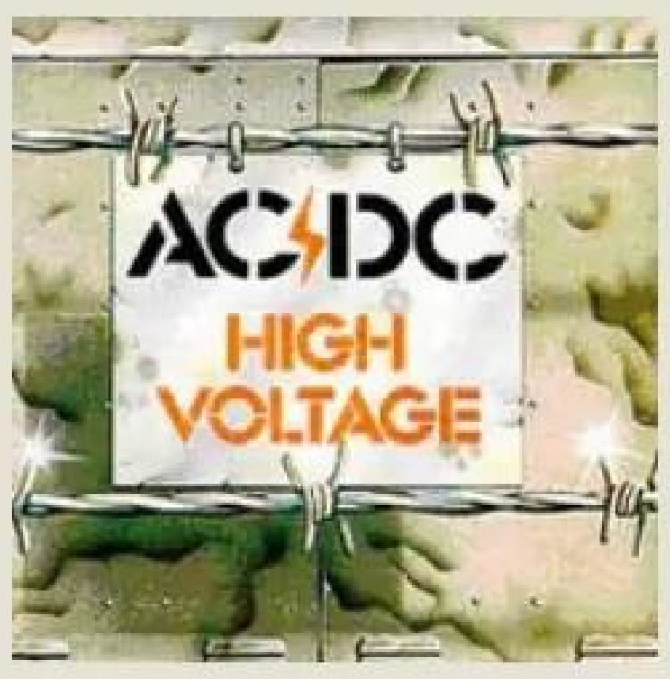
Nevertheless, to be on the safe side it was decided the band should hurry back into the studio in Sydney and record a new album, before heading back to the UK. Thus, in January 1977, AC/DC entered Alberts Studios in Sydney, where all their records had been made up 'til that point, and spent two weeks recording what came to be known as *Let There Be Rock*.

"There was always a siege mentality about that band," says Mark Evans. "But once we all found out that Atlantic had knocked us back the attitude was: 'Fuck them! Who the fuck do they think they are?' So from that point onwards it was: 'Fuck, we'll show them!' We were seriously fucking pissed off about it. It didn't need to be discussed. We were going to go in and make that album and shove it up their arse."

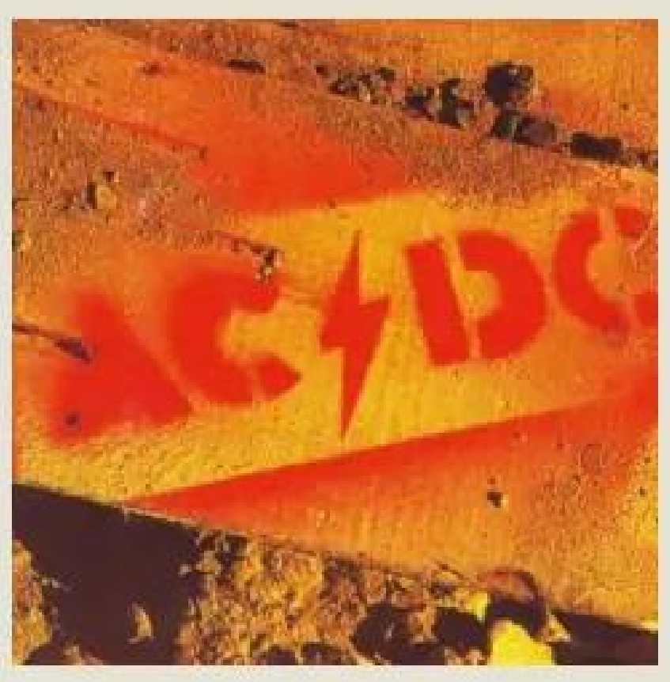
The result would be the first utterly explosive AC/DC album.

SHEER ART ATTACK

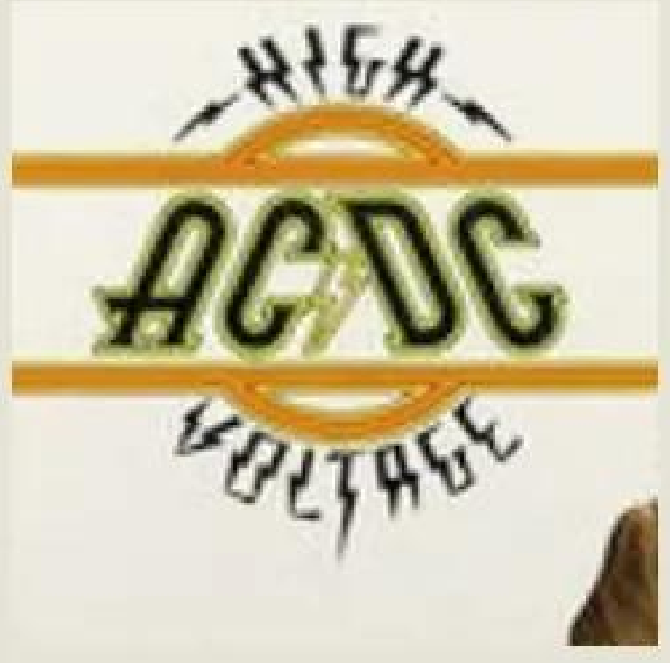
Let There Be Rock marked the first appearance of the classic AC/DC logo. Here's how they got there...



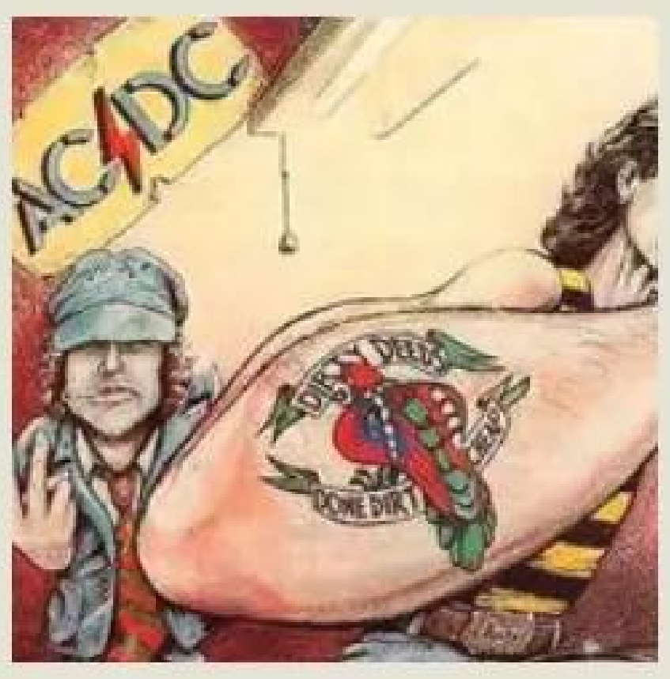
The Oz-only *High Voltage*: dangerous.



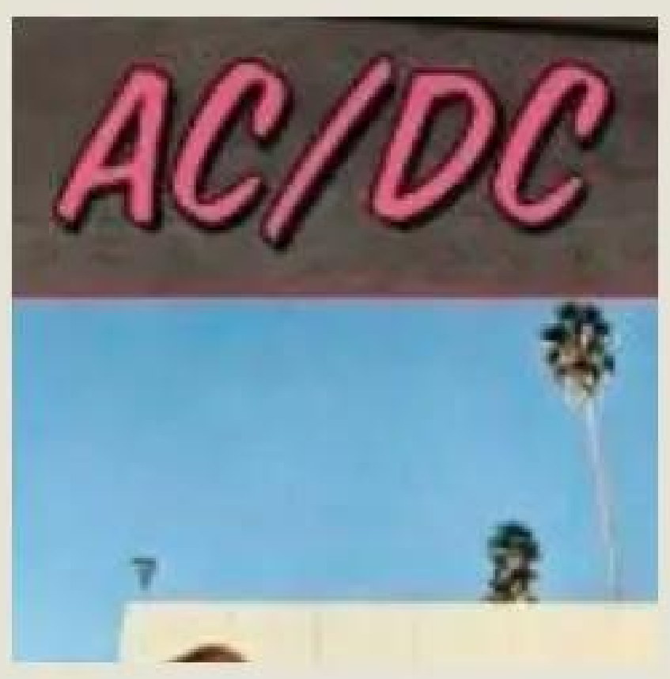
1976's *T.N.T.*: vandalised.



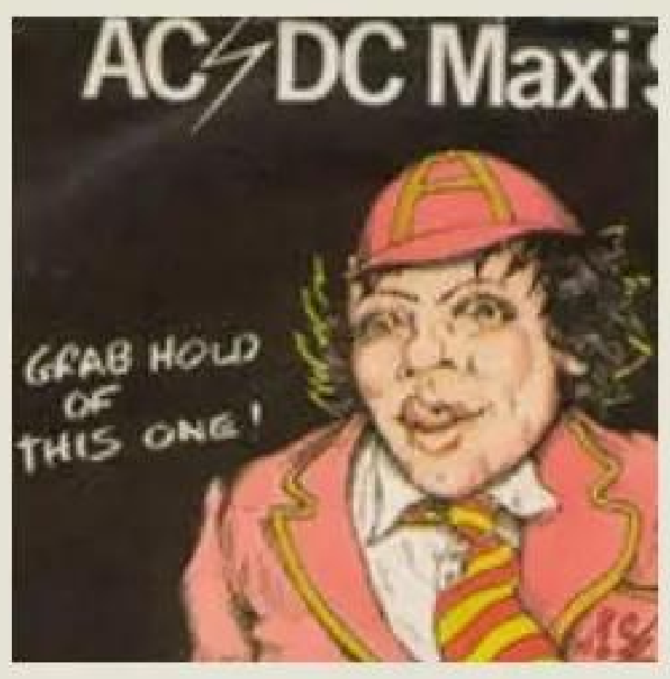
***High Voltage*'s UK logo: electrifying.**



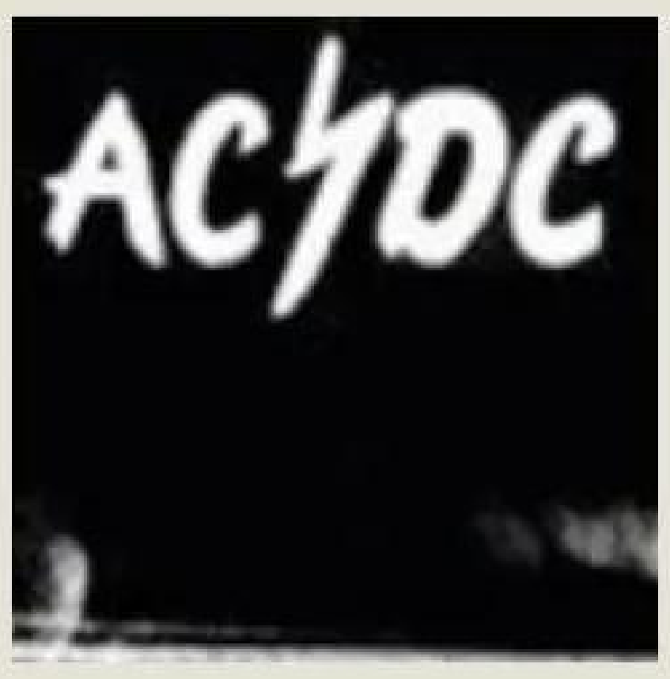
The Aussie *Dirty Deeds*: remedial.



***Dirty Deeds*, UK version: fuschia.**



***Dirty Deeds* single: chalky.**



***Let There Be Rock*'s first cover: scrawled.**

Above: AC/DC at the Kursaal Ballroom, Southend, March 19, 1977. A photo from the same gig would appear on the *Let There Be Rock* sleeve.

KEITH MORRIS ESTATE

Malcolm and Angus weren't the only members of the Young family fired up by their ruck with Atlantic. The band's task of sticking it to their international label was aided in no small measure by the presence of their elder brother George, who was working at the time as an in-house producer for AC/DC's Australian label Albert Productions, alongside songwriting partner and fellow former Easybeat Harry Vanda.

"If anything, George was even more determined to prove the Americans wrong than Malcolm and Angus," says Evans. "And I think they got it right."

> ***"There was a siege mentality. It was, 'F***k the label, we'll show them.'"***
>
> Mark Evans

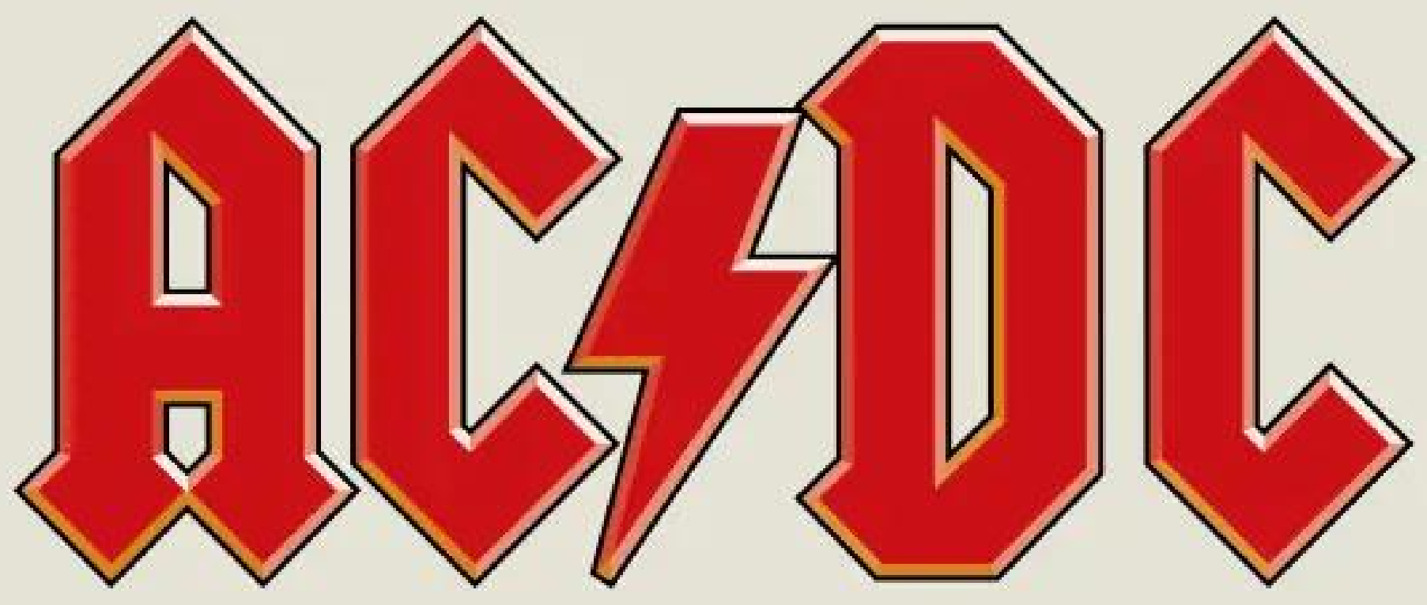
They certainly did. From the sound of a whisky-guzzling Bon counting in the intro to the swaggering opening track *Go Down*, a song about a real-life friend of his named Ruby (as in Ruby Lips, though her actual name was Wendy), known for her fondness for *'lickin' on that lickin' stick'*, to the frantic finale *Whole Lotta Rosie*, about another lady friend acquainted with the singer's lickin' stick – this one *'weighing in at 19 stone'* – *Let There Be Rock* didn't let up for its eight-track, 40-minute duration.

It sounded exactly like what it was. Written and recorded fast, before the vibe had time to fade, it was full of blood and spittle and anger and put-a-fuck-into-you fun, fuelled by cheap speed and cold beer, topped up with expensive whisky and at least a million cigarettes, some of them smelling distinctly 'funny'. If Atlantic in America had been expecting something rather more in tune with the lukewarm milk of drivetime radio in the mid-70s, they were in for a shock.

Even if the band had not been in such an angry frame of mind when they made the album, it's unlikely that AC/DC would have taken any more care making *Let There Be Rock*. "All the albums I made with them were done in a two-week period," says Mark Evans. "The songs were written in the studio; we never did a demo."

If the three albums that came before it – *High Voltage*, *T.N.T.* and *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* – had an increasingly high quotient of brilliance, *Let There Be Rock* was the one where AC/DC truly found their place in the scheme of things, not least on the title track, a heartfelt ode to original, no-shit rock'n'roll as evinced by the fastest, most irresistibly hair-shaking piece of high-octane noise ever committed to what was still then just poor, weak vinyl. Elsewhere, *Hell Ain't A Bad Place To Be* stood as AC/DC's own *Brown Sugar*.

"If you're a purist and like the guitars being completely in tune and things being completely studio-sterile, that song's



***Let There Be Rock*: the logo we know and love.**

KEITH MORRIS ESTATE

Let there be rock: on record AC/DC finally managed to capture the energy of their live shows.

> ***"Bon was always f*cking up one way or the other. There was always a drama."***
>
> Michael Browning

gonna kill you," Mark Evans explains of the latter, "cos the guitars are whomping all over the place out of tune. But it's just got that nasty, gritty feel about it that says AC/DC."

Indeed the whole album sounds like it's on the verge of spilling over into total feedback. It was recorded live in one room. Mistakes were tolerated if the vibe was strong enough, the energy audibly crackling over the speakers on tracks like *Overdose* or *Bad Boy Boogie*.

Another Oz band, The Angels, had recently signed to Albert Productions and were also being produced in the studio by Vanda and Young.

"I watched *Let There Be Rock* be recorded," says drummer Graham 'Buzz' Bidstrup. "It was all to do with the feel, it wasn't about perfection. They would play the riff until George said: 'I think you've got the groove there.' That might be five minutes, it might be 10. Remember, there's no drum machines, no click tracks, no nothing. They'd just hammer at Phil Rudd."

The only way the band knew how to record back then was simply to play as if they were doing a gig. "If Angus was recording a solo, he would be climbing all over the amps and rolling around the floor," says Bidstrup. "That was part of what made George and Harry good producers – they could actually get the band fired up to be so excited about what they were doing that Angus would crawl around on the floor."

The title song became the one AC/DC would end their set with for years to come. But, for Mark Evans, the real hero of the track was undoubtedly Phil Rudd. "Phil on that is just absolutely out of this world. We did two takes of it, and at the end of the first one I remember thinking: 'That's the end of Phil for a couple of hours.' But Phil said: 'Let's go again now.' I thought the guy was gonna fucking explode. From my memory, I'm pretty sure they used the second take."

Angus later recalled seeing smoke "pouring out of the fucking amp", at the end of the *LTBR* take. "George is fucking screaming: 'Don't stop!'" The amp held out until the end of the song, when "it melted". It was simply one of those albums, Angus concluded, "where it was all cooking".

Rhythm and backing tracks were all completed in the first week. Bon, who'd be given cassettes of the mixed-down, vocal-less tracks which he then "scribbled words to", did his vocals in the second week, during which Angus also laid down his guitar solos.

"Bon had this book he took everywhere with him," Evans recalls, "full of song titles and ideas for lyrics. Bon would be locked away with his books, writing lyrics and fitting them to the backing tracks. Except, that is, on those days when you'd go in there and he'd done a bunk and didn't come back for two days."

Some of the new tracks, like *Bad Boy Boogie*, had previously existed in miniature form. "It was a title that was around and a riff that we'd messed around with a little bit maybe at soundcheck," says Evans. "Others, like *Whole Lotta Rosie*, didn't look like they were gonna happen at first."

The idea of *Let There Be Rock* – indeed AC/DC's whole career – without *Whole Lotta Rosie* is unthinkable. Originally called *Dirty Eyes*, the band initially struggled to ➜

make it work. The song only clicked after a week of work. And yes, the titular character was based on a real person.

"She was a Tasmanian girl," Evans chuckles. "A massive girl. Bigger than the lot of us put together. There was a brothel out the back of the hotel we used to stay at in Melbourne, St Kilda, and Rosie used to run it. Then one day Pat Pickett, Bon's best mate and our stage guy, came running in saying: 'You've got to come and have a look at this! He's fucked her!' So I went in to Bon's room, and you could see this massive fucking whale of a woman on the bed, and you could see a little arm sticking out underneath with tattoos on it. Pat said: 'Look, he's in there somewhere!' She was a good sport, though, Rosie, a real good person to have around. I can't confirm or deny whether Rosie was her real name, but we knew her as Rosie cos she had red hair."

There was also another delightful little Bon ditty included on the original Australian and British and European versions of the album, but which the American record company put their foot down about: *Crabsody In Blue*, a wonderfully swinging blues song – half *Ride On*, half *The Jack* – based again on Bon's own personal sexual history. To wit: *'Well they move on down and they crawl around.'* Thirty-five years on, the humour may seem strained, even anachronistic. But at the time, *Crabsody In Blue* was positively anarchic. It certainly proved too much for the Americans (and eventually the Japanese record company too), who replaced the track with *Problem Child*, ironically from *Dirty Deeds*, the album they had also just rejected.

"THEY RIPPED THE WHOLE BACKDROP DOWN!"

Photographer Martyn Goddard on the perils of shooting AC/DC in the mid-70s.

"I shot a lot of bands for record labels at the time, and AC/DC's PR asked me if I wanted to shoot them. They were over playing a residency at the Marquee, between July and August 1976, and the label wanted a press kit to go with it.

"It was a simple press shoot. I'd come up with this idea to cut a hole in the backdrop and flash a light through it so it looked like a spark.

"So the band come in, we sit them down and we do the spark picture. After 15 minutes you could see them beginning to get restless. They decided that they weren't going to do it, and ripped the whole backdrop down. They did it very nicely, but clearly it was all about being rock'n'roll.

"So I said to the label: 'If you can get them in the next few days, we can do it again.' I'd photographed the band Slik at Shepperton Studios, on the abandoned set from the musical *Oliver*. It had broken glass everywhere, facades falling down. I thought that would be perfect for AC/DC – they can't do any damage, because it's already trashed.

"So we got in a minibus down there. I took along some smoke bombs – I could see that these guys wanted to play, but they didn't want to act. That's their poster in the photos – they just got it out of the bus and stuck it up over a Led Zeppelin poster, which says a lot about them.

"They sat apart from other bands. The idea of a guy in a school uniform was bizarre, but they had an attitude – they knew what they wanted. They definitely weren't shrinking violets, even then."

For more info, visit www.martyngoddard.com

AC/DC with the ill-fated 'spark' backdrop (above), and on the old *Oliver* set at Shepperton Studios (left).

MARTYN GODDARD/GETTY

AC/DC's fourth album, and their best yet, *Let There Be Rock* was released in Australia in March 1977… and barely made the Top 20 there. Reviews were equally dismal. The headline in Sydney newspaper the *Sun* read simply: 'What a bore.' Ian Jeffery was a London-based Scot who began working with the band as their tour manager that year. "That hurt them far more than America not getting their music," he recalls of the reception that the album received in Australia. "The fact that their own country seemed to have let them down."

The criticism stung them so much that it would be several years before the band deigned to return to Australia to tour. Instead they went back to London, where the sense of AC/DC versus the world only got stronger.

"When we were in London we would all go out," says Jeffery. "Our pub was the Warrington in Maida Vale. Malcolm would even bring Angus to the Warrington sometimes. Angus would have lemonade or orange, but Malcolm would always start on pints and end up with a couple of stiff whiskies. That's when you knew it was time to go home."

But even in London, the tide seemed to be turning against them. Punk had arrived, and suddenly AC/DC were in danger of being swept under the rock-media carpet along with other 'dinosaur' rockers like Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones.

The band were typically defiant. They were disdainful of the punks' playing ability – "At least the Rolling Stones were competent musically," Angus sneered – and their so-called rebellious attitude. "The real punks were the [original blues] guys who had to fight from the beginning to get accepted," declared Malcolm, citing Bon Scott as more of a wild man than Johnny Rotten could ever be. The

→

> ***"There was a brothel behind our hotel and Rosie used to run it."***
>
> Mark Evans

Top left: Young Angus. Calm down ladies, etc.

LEND US A HAND

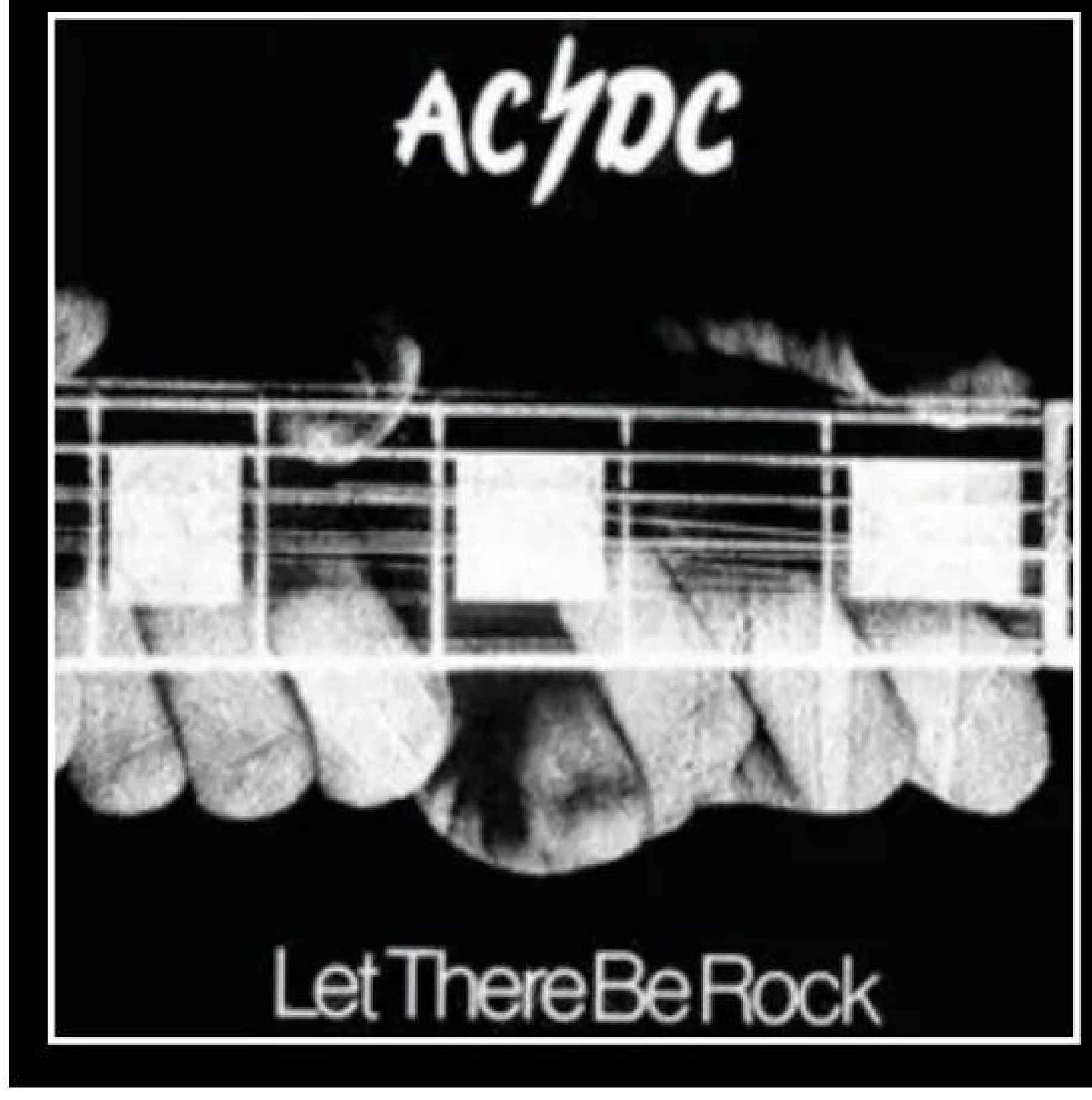
The digits on the original *Let There Be Rock* sleeve didn't belong to Angus, so whose fingers were they?

The original, Australian version of *Let There Be Rock* has a completely different cover to the one that most fans in the rest of the world recognise. Rather than featuring a weirdly colourised shot of the band playing live, it had a double-image photograph of a hand on a guitar fretboard. Bizarrely, the hand isn't even that of a member of AC/DC – the person on the other end of it is Chris Turner, guitarist with fellow Aussie rockers Buffalo.

"There was a bloke called Colin Stead, who was in Buffalo for about 10 minutes," Turner tells *Classic Rock*. "He was also the centrefold photographer for *Playboy*. He phoned me up and said he was doing the album cover for *Let There Be Rock*, but AC/DC were out of town so could I help out – he wanted a flash guitar run up and down the neck."

Buffalo and AC/DC were mates from the Aussie pub-rock circuit, and Turner was happy to oblige – although he wasn't prepared for Angus Young's reaction. "Apparently, when he saw it Angus said: 'He's got fat fingers, hasn't he?'"

These days, Turner still plays in several Australian bands, and runs his own label, Big Rock. He insists there's no jealousy at AC/DC's subsequent success, and holds up *Let There Be Rock* as one of the band's greatest albums. "It's a classic, isn't it?" he says. "I'm still waiting for the cheque, though."



GETTY

band's disdain for what they saw as an entirely artificial scene was further exasperated by incidents like the one when Malcolm stormed off the set after an Australian TV interviewer tried baiting him into saying something 'outrageous' – then found himself pursued by the show's producer begging him to come back and storm off again so they could film it better.

When the *NME* tried to take AC/DC to task for playing to the crowd rather than 'challenging' them, Bon dusted them down. "These kids might be working in a shitty factory all week, or they might be on the dole," he said. "Come the weekend, they want to go out and have a good time, get drunk and go wild. We give them the opportunity to do that."

Legendary US critic and punk apostle Lester Bangs – in the UK on assignment for *Rolling Stone* magazine – declared AC/DC to be "so true to the evolutionary antecedents" of rock; their songs weren't just about "hold-my-hand stuff, but the most challengingly blatant, flat-out proposition and prurient fantasy".

The only truth for the band, though, lay out on the road. They began their biggest UK tour yet with a sold-out show at Edinburgh University, during which Bon called a halt to proceedings halfway through *Dog Eat Dog*, in protest at the heavy-handed way security was dealing with their admittedly out-of-control fans.

A single was released to coincide with the dates – *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* b/w even older tracks *Big Balls* and *The Jack* – which Atlantic cleverly promoted with the slogan: 'All radio stations are banned from playing this record.' It wasn't true, but you couldn't tell the difference, with only John Peel on Radio One choosing to ignore the 'ban'.

On tour, the Young brothers would room together, and Mark Evans and Phil Rudd would room together. That left Ian Jeffery to room with Bon.

"Now that really was an experience," Jeffery says now, chuckling ruefully. "The amount of times I would be in bed sleeping, and Bon would come in and be sitting talking to the TV, thinking he's talking to me or whoever. I'd reach over and put the TV off and he'd go to bed."

The 18-date UK tour ended at London's Rainbow Theatre on March 11 – the same day *LTBR* was released in Australia, along with their latest single there, *Dog Eat Dog*. Given the apathy with which they felt the Australian public and media now offered them, they grudgingly filmed a live performance of *Dog Eat Dog* at rehearsals for a special edition of *Countdown* hosted by Leo Sayer, but it was a desultory affair. Instead of his usual shirtless appearance, Bon looks as though he's wrapped up against the London cold in a fur-trimmed jacket, while Angus has ditched the school uniform in favour of a stripy T-shirt. It had been a long day filming, during which the drinks had flowed freely and by the end of it everybody was simply in a hurry to leave.

In April they flew out for the start of a 12-date tour opening for Black Sabbath. It was supposed to be another step up the ladder – new equipment had been purchased; extra road crew hired to help them operate it – but instead it turned into yet another disaster. "All the gear was blowing up," Angus complained of the first show, in Paris. "We played about 20 minutes then destroyed the stage."

From that point on, relations between the two bands became strained – though, typically, Bon immediately hit it off with Sabbath frontman Ozzy Osbourne, who

> ***"Malcolm would be off the rails any time. I've seen the wrath within the band."***
>
> Ian Jeffery

MARTYN GODDARD/GETTY

AC/DC in London, 1976: (l-r) Malcolm Young, Mark Evans, Bon Scott, Angus Young, Phil Rudd.

later recalled being impressed by the fact that Bon wore brothel creepers on stage – as Ozzy then did too. "They were great to work with on the stage, and I thought I was the only guy that wore them," Ozzy said.

But the tour came to a premature conclusion when AC/DC were sacked after an altercation between Malcolm Young and Sabbath bassist Geezer Butler. For years, the story circulated that Geezer had foolishly pulled a knife on Malcolm in the bar of the hotel they were sharing in Sweden, and that Malcolm had immediately reacted by flooring the hapless Sabbath bassist. In truth, it had only been a toy flick-knife comb. The result, however, was the same: AC/DC were on a flight back to London the very next day.

Kicking their heels back in the capital in May, Mark Evans was the next to feel the cold wind of change. Michael Browning called him to a band meeting at which it was announced they no longer needed his services. Evans says now he believes it was "a commitment issue. But then nobody could have been as committed to that band as the Young brothers were."

According to Michael Browning now, it wasn't commitment so much as a growing antagonism towards Evans from the brothers. "Angus had some personality issues against Mark," says Browning.

Ian Jeffery suggests that Malcolm Young played a significant part in the decision. "Malcolm would be off the rails at any given time. I've seen the wrath within the band, let alone to people outside. If he thinks they're not cutting it, or talking to somebody he didn't know about… just anything, at any level."

Browning confesses that when Malcolm Young summoned him to the meeting to discuss Evans, he suspected there was an entirely different problem.

"At first I thought I was getting the phone call to come around and talk about what we were going to do about Bon," he remembers. "Bon was always fucking up, one way or the other. There was always a drama."

Drama and Bon Scott just went together, his life an apparently never-ending roller-coaster. He'd gone from being a teenage borstal boy to playing drums in pub bands, then graduated from that to being second-banana singer in The Valentines, and then hairy minstrel in Fraternity. Everybody has a different memory.

The Angels' Graham 'Buzz' Bidstrup first met Bon in 1972. "He was a long-haired, recorder-playing hippie," recalls Bidstrup. "He lived up in the hills and took magic mushrooms and smoked pot. I don't ever remember him as being a hell-raiser, fighter guy."

By the time Bon joined AC/DC in 1974, however, he was all but down-and-out, still recovering from a horrendous motorcycle accident – he'd been drunk and ridden the bike into an oncoming car – which left him in a coma for three days and broke virtually every important bone in his body, and was working scraping the barnacles off the bottom of boats for a living while sleeping on a couch at a friend's place.

Three years on, he was seen as the ultimate hard man, the Aussie king of no-frills rock'n'roll. "Alcohol and drugs and hanging out with loose women – it's all very good for the body and soul," he bragged to one interviewer. But behind the brawling, gap-toothed, tattooed persona he presented to the outside world lay a 31-year-old man trying to make sense of his life and the strange, unexpected places it had taken him.

When I was working with Thin Lizzy in the late 70s I ran across two versions of Bon Scott. There was the guy who offered to buy everyone in the bar of the Marquee a drink, then settled down to regale us

High voltage: AC/DC do it the only way they know how – by taking it to the people.

GETTY

all with hilarious stories from his past. "My life's like a toilet seat, mate," I recall him saying to us. "Up and down!" Followed by that laugh, as dirty as a drain. Then there was the other Bon I met during daylight hours, hanging out at his on-off-on-again girlfriend Silver's pad in London's Gloucester Road. This one was quiet, would gently offer to make you tea, then roll a spliff and allow you to chill out and find your own level.

As Mark Evans says now, Bon Scott "had acquaintances everywhere, but very few friends". This apparently extended to his AC/DC bandmates, who Bon had already begun to drift away from by the time *LTBR* was released in the UK in June '77. Known to the brothers behind his back as "the old man", the singer increasingly preferred his own company on the road.

"The Young brothers loved Bon, no two ways about that," says Browning. "But Bon had that left-over hippie thing of smoking dope, dropping pills and all that sort of thing. You know, dope for the Young brothers was a big no-no. They hated being around people that were stoned or whatever. Alcohol was a different story, no problems there. But anyone stoned… Bon would have felt uncomfortable being with them in that sort of environment. So that was his trip. He used to go off and do all that stuff. They accepted it, no problems. He just sort of lived and travelled in a different world than they did."

Quite literally sometimes, too. By the time AC/DC embarked on their first American tour, in July 1977, Bon had picked up the habit of travelling with the support band. "We opened for them for a few shows when they came to Texas and Bon surprised us by travelling to all the shows on our bus," recalls Y&T singer/guiarist Dave Meniketti. "I think he thought our bus was just… funkier."

"It became the usual thing," says Ian Jeffery. "Half an hour to go to show time, and everyone wondering where the fuck is Bon. Next thing he'd turn up with 10 of his new best mates, all waving whisky bottles and smoking joints."

According to Mark Evans, Bon felt isolated on the road. "We all had our moments where you thought, what the fuck am I doing here, you know? But Bon had been on the road maybe 10 years by then. Even with the success we all felt was coming, I think it wore a bit thin for him."

For a while in 1977, the whole AC/DC experience had looked decidedly thin all round. That all changed with the international release that summer of *Let There Be Rock*. A relative flop in Australia, it became the first AC/DC album to enter the British album chart, reaching No.75. A new bassist, Liverpool-born Cliff Williams, had been brought in in time for their US tour, and suddenly it was all systems go again.

"There was generally a feeling of, let's try and get this up to the next level," recalls Browning. "Not in the sense where the group tailor-made a record to that end, more just on a business level. I managed to get some reasonably good marketing dollars put forward for that album. We got a little bit more aggressive in those terms, and it paid off."

Although *Let There Be Rock* managed to make it only to No.154 in the US, it marked the start of a journey that, just three years later, would see AC/DC becoming one of the biggest rock bands the world would ever see. It was just a pity that Bon Scott wouldn't be around long enough to see it happen. Interviewed on that first tour by New York fanzine *Punk*, which asked Bon for the meaning of his life, he answered: "As good a time and as short as possible." It became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nevertheless, as Phil Carson now says, *Let There Be Rock* became the turning point in the story of AC/DC. "They'd gone from almost down and completely out with *Dirty Deeds*, to back in the game big-time with *Let There Be Rock*. By the time they finally got to America with that album, Atlantic in New York had hired John Kalodner as an A&R man, and he got it that this was never going to be an act you made through singles and radio play. He came to see them play, and saw right away that that was the way this band was gonna break: by simply taking it to the people. And that's really all they've done ever since."

Well, not quite all, as Ian Jeffery attests. "Things stayed the same live – they were always brilliant on stage. But behind the scenes the story had only just begun, really."

Although they could not have known it then, AC/DC had reached a high with *Let There Be Rock* – defiant yet innocent, determined yet guaranteed nothing, still hanging by a thread to their American record deal, yet full of belief in their mission – that they would never be able to repeat, no matter how they keep trying, even today.

"Those were definitely the days," says Jeffery. "I was there when Bon died, and I was there when Brian Johnson came in and they finally achieved enormous success. And they did some great things after Bon. But not like when they were making albums like *Let There Be Rock*. I still hear songs from it now and go: 'Oh boy, I wish I could go back right now and do it all again.'"

> ***"They did some great things after Bon. But not like* Let There Be Rock.*"***
>
> Ian Jeffery

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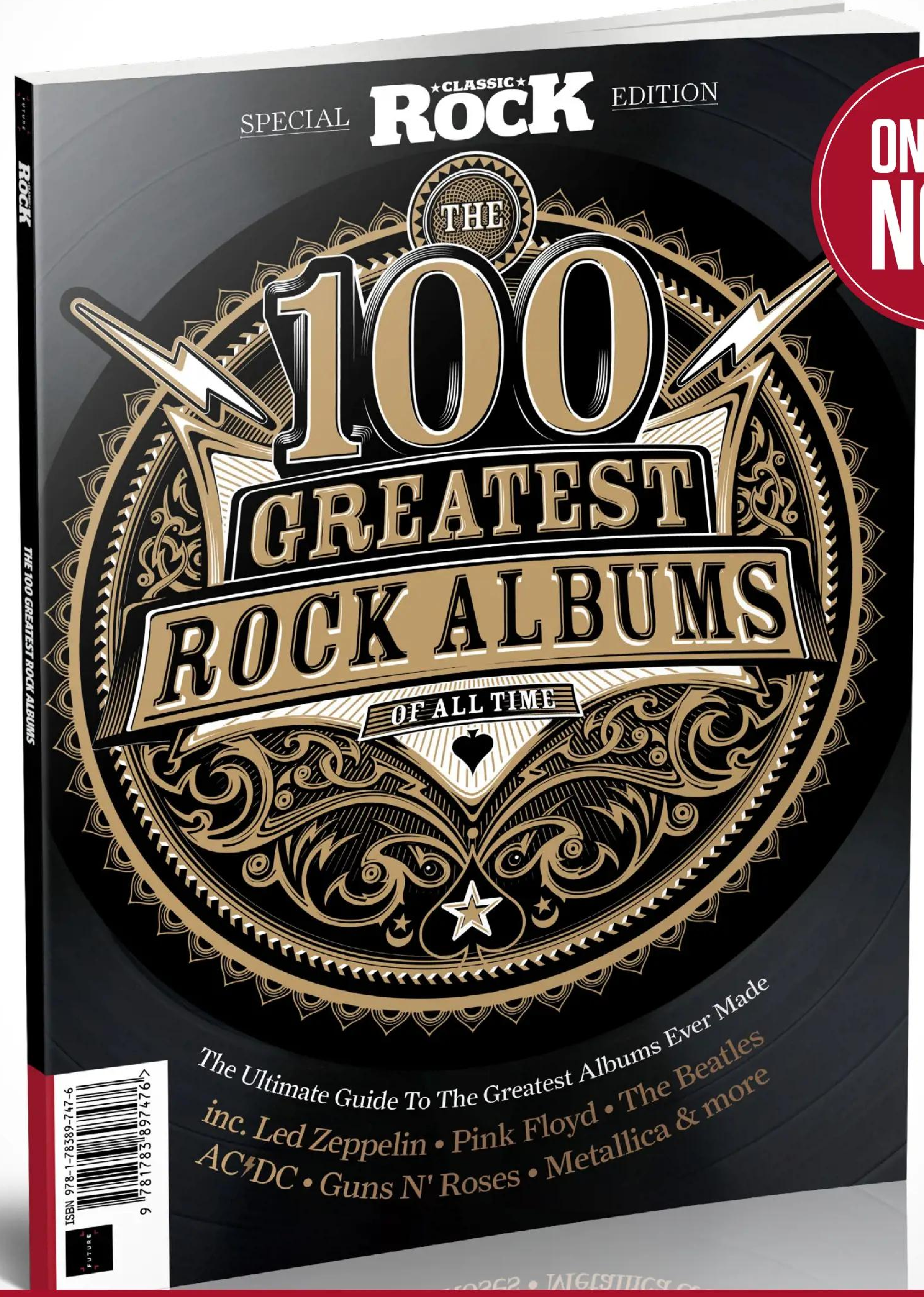
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Riff Raff

When they came back to the UK in '77, AC/DC had already made a name for themselves and were intent on laying waste to the country…

FRONTLINE REPORT: HARRY DOHERTY

It's 1977, and Britain is about to bow to a new band of hard rockers who are threatening to kick ass and claim the crown as true purveyors of rock music. And they were neither American nor British.

Well, sort of British… out of Australia. AC/DC have Scottish heritage, and when they climbed out of the gutter with their raw-edged hard rock, they took their homeland by storm, with the UK next on the radar. With two steaming albums already released here – *Powerage* and *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, they were certainly on my radar. They had a rough reputation to match their music, so it was with a bit of trepidation when it was suggested that I travel down to a gig in Cardiff with singer Bon Scott to see and interview the band.

I met up with Bon, renowned as a man who liked his partying, at Paddington Station, a run-down excuse for a railway station in those days, in the little bar in a dark corner. We were early, and Bon needed something to lift the jet-lag after just flying in from Australia, so what harm in a few drinks? A bourbon and a vodka with mixers, please. But one became two, two became three… and three became… er… something blurry.

"Nothing like a drink to get ya set for a boring train ride," said Bon by way of welcome. I suppose the record label should have taken the precaution of having a press officer ride shotgun, as our timings were pretty tight anyway to make the gig – and especially when we saw that had two minutes to find the platform and get on the train that would take us to exotic Cardiff.

We slapped down the last of the liquor and made a dash for the platform, to be confronted with two trains. Now, was it that platform or that one? We hastily discussed this and decided it was the one on the left. As the train shuttled out of central London, we settled in for the trip west, immediately inquisitive as to where the bar was…

Which was when we discovered that this particular locomotive was headed north, as opposed to the Welsh borders, and it would be 45 minutes before the first stop.

Scott wasn't fazed in the least, like this happened regularly – and it probably did. We merrily resumed our alcohol consumption and by the time we reached our turnaround point, we were at least one-and-a-half sheets to the wind. Through an incoming alcoholic haze, we managed to work out that we could get a connection to Reading where we could pick up the train to Cardiff, but this was becoming an expedition for both of us.

Bon is a good drinking partner and good company, but doesn't give away too much. He liked his drink (too much, as it sadly turned out). "I like drinking. It must be the Scot in me. As I often say, I'm a special drunkard – I drink too much".

He loved the life that AC/DC gave him, at one stage on our journey confessing: "Dunno what I'd do without this band, y'know. I live for it. We're a real down'n'dirty lot. The songs reflect just what we are – booze, wimmen, sex, rock'n'roll. That's what life's all about."

It wasn't the age of the mobile phone, so there was no one we could phone. Not that we had any numbers to call; Bon's tour itinerary was in his bag, which had travelled directly on to the gig with the rest of the band.

Eventually, we got there. Central Cardiff back in those days was a mite under-developed, another neglected inner city. The Top Rank Suite reflected that depression. As we entered the dingy dressing room, bouncing off a few walls on the way, the rest of AC/DC were getting ready to go on stage, just waiting for the bold Bon to show up, as they surely knew he would.

"Awlright, lads," he said to no one in particular. "We had a wee bit of a problem on the way and nearly ended up in Glasgow."

Actually, AC/DC had been banned from Glasgow on this tour. The fall-out and outcry from the Sex Pistols' shaming of Bill Grundy had repercussions way beyond punk, and the good folk who ruled Glasgow, remembering an earlier gig at the City Hall when AC/DC fans wrecked the place, promptly slapped a ban on them playing there. Liverpool stadium, too, had barred them. "Never mind, they'll open up again to us when they're losing money," Angus Young surmised pragmatically.

AC/DC at this stage were building a healthy reputation with British rock audiences. *Powerage* and *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* had contributed to that, and the live performances were sealing the deal, though many fans didn't know what way to take the 'Angus Effect', the guitarist playing in a schoolboy outfit. Not that it worried the man himself.

"Ah've always seen people like Chuck Berry duck-walking and Jerry Lee Lewis stripping off, so I decided I would wear the outfit for a bit of fun," he told me après-gig. "If I went on stage like this [jeans and T-shirt], I'd look dumb. That outfit does me justice! I can pull the hat over my head and hide me face; I can show me knees; I can flash me arse. Me bum's about the best side of me."

I told him that I'd been talking to a fan earlier who was most disappointed he hadn't flashed his posterior during the show.

"Cos I didn't take off me pants? Nah, I only do that when I feel like puttin' shit on the audience. Some audiences you get are really rowdy and to shut them up, you just go, 'Take that, ya poof!' It's just to shut them up, to quell them. I've been on stage, especially in Australia, and there would be guys there all night ribbin' me and they'd be shouting, 'Angus has no balls'. Until I eventually take off me pants and show 'em. Cos they're gonna keep it up all night, so ya gotta shut them up pretty quick."

I wondered (seems silly now) how long he would keep the gimmick up?

"As long as I want to. I like to go on lookin' the part so that straightaway it's something to look at. My thing is that I like to see somethin' to get people away from drinkin' and see what we're

RON POWNALL/FRANK WHITE

“The songs reflect what we are – booze, wimmen, sex, rock’n’roll. That’s what life’s all about.” – Bon Scott

Shakin' 'em all night long.

KEITH MORRIS/REDFERNS

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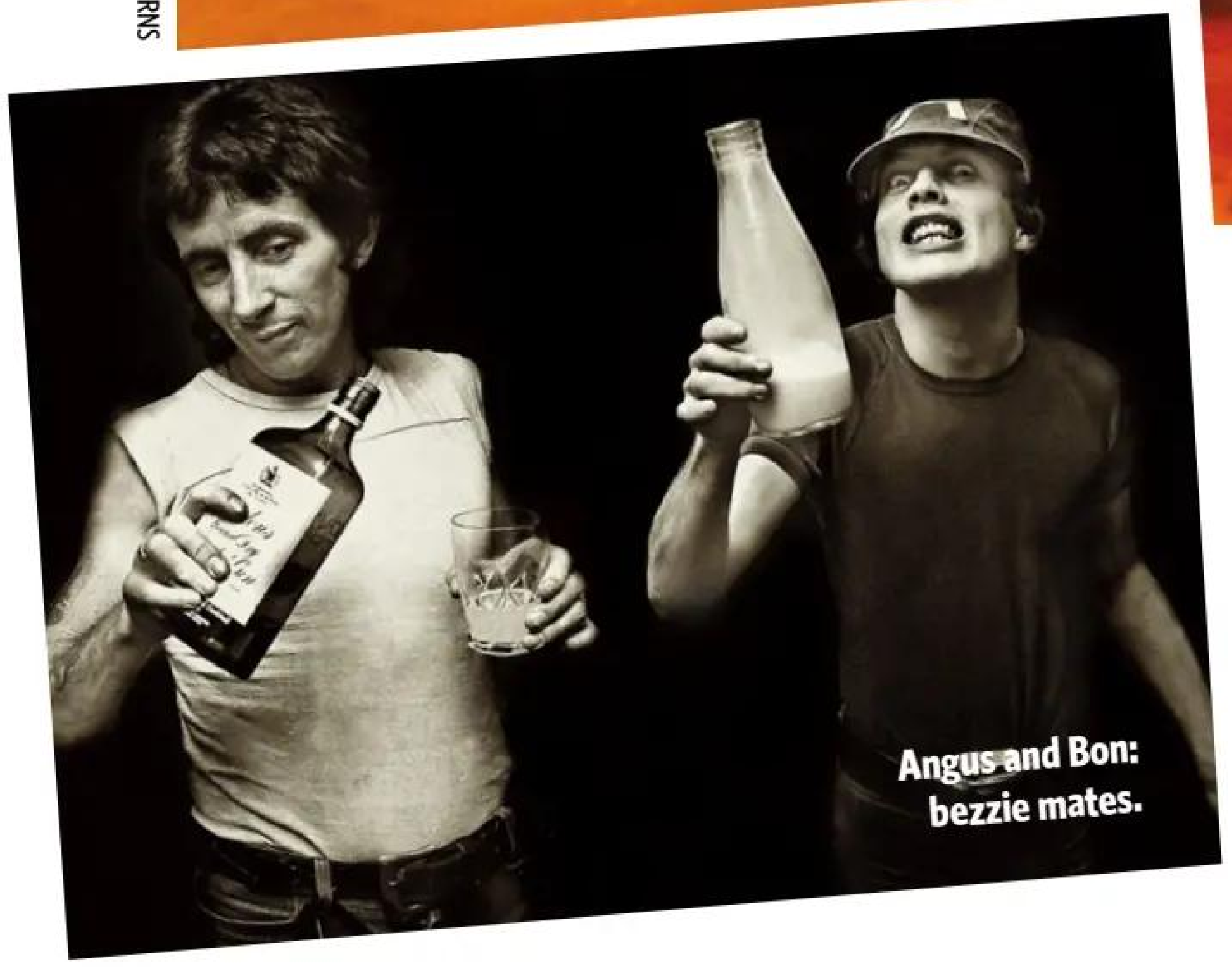

Angus and Bon: bezzie mates.

doin'. It's to keep people interested, not bored. Nah, I'll never get embarrassed by it. The only time I get embarrassed is when you get a crowd that's stone-cold silent; but that only makes us work harder anyway. We get them in the end. We always have."

Many readers of this will only have seen AC/DC play in stadiums or festivals. If you can imagine that performance power cycled into a small gig in front of barely 1,000 punters, then you might get an idea of how lethal AC/DC were live in those early days. They were hungry and got the audience totally involved in their feeding frenzy.

At gigs in places like Cardiff Top Rank, it was tailor-made for Angus Young and his antics. Like some crazy hard rock version of *Rock Around The Clock*, he dives into the audience and finds himself on the dancefloor, surrounded by a perfect circle of headbanging fans.

Somehow, Bon Scott makes it through the gig, but I suspect that the bout of booze intake earlier was part of a normal daily diet for him.

When we get back to the Post House hotel, the drinking resumes. Up in Angus's room, we're back on the hard stuff, with Angus maintaining tee-total status. But, then, whatever the constitution of his fibre is, he doesn't need any artificial stimulation to get his highs! We have a good old banter about AC/DC making inroads in the UK, and how they naively expect that their new maxi-single – *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*, *The Jack* and *Big Balls* will get played on British radio.

They're not filthy, Angus maintains. They're intended to be funny. Bon takes another view: "Rugby clubs have been doing the same thing for years. Songs like that. The songs that won the Second World War were like that, with the chaps singing them as they marched into battle."

"Look," Angus pointed out, "there's not much seriousness in it. It's just rock'n'roll. Chew it up and spit it out. If you look at it this way, most of the kids in the street talk like that. It's the language of the clubs that we heard when we started off in Australia; same when we came here, in places like the Marquee. Kids would be swearin' their heads off. They don't say, 'Turn it up…'; they say, 'FUCKING TURN IT UP!' We're as subtle as what they are.

"As far as radio stations go, you can turn on the radio and you wouldn't like to hear your songs on the radio anyhow, cos it's in there with Barry White playing his Love Unlimited bollocks. That's a bit degradin' for us."

"Yeah, right," comes the shout from the corner, where a slowly disintegrating Bon Scott suddenly perks up. "Like tonight's gig, that was our sort of people. A lotta people get us wrong. A lotta people say that we can't play. Fuck 'em. We get on and play down and dirty rock'n' roll cos that's what we do best."

With that, Bon collapses, leaving his guitarist to pick up the thread:

"I'm not sayin' that we're that special. We just go on and play rock'n'roll with plenty of balls, plenty of meat, plenty of spontaneity. That's our main thing. What makes our set different is that we have good songs and we play 'em well. A lotta bands can play the basics but they can't play with quality.

"We can build a song at a hundred miles an hour and play it right at that speed. It's got the right feel. The right… everything, whereas you got a lot of bands who just play fast and don't give a fuck if they're outta tune. Good songs are essential. In the old days, you had rhythm'n'blues; songs like I'm A Man, Chuck Berry's Schooldays. You put songs from nowadays up against them and they're nuffin'."

While Bon sleeps his jet-lag and excess off in the corner, Angus and I go on about the public and press perception of AC/DC, specifically that there's a danger that they could be seen as a hard rock version of Barry McKenzie [fictional Australian yobbo].

He bites back: "Well, we take it seriously to a point, but if everyone took it too seriously, we'd all be walking around with down faces and we'd all be living in the gutter. Bands who take

DICK BARNATT/REDFERNS/GETTY

> "It's just rock'n'roll. Chew it up and spit it out. Most kids talk like that." – Angus

The old school tie: Angus lassos Bon.

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

> "Led Zep bored the audience for over two hours. That's sick."
> – Angus

themselves too seriously are fools, because they've taken it so seriously that they're not allowing themselves to enjoy it. The bawdiness balances out with other things in our set but you've got to break the monotony.

"It's like Liberace… he can't get up and play Beethoven all night, so he bends a little. It's like if you got Beethoven and Bach and brought all those classical people back for a concert on TV one night and on the other channel you had *The Lone Ranger*, it's guaranteed *The Lone Ranger* would pull the biggest ratings because it's entertainment rather than pure boredom all night!"

Eh? I think he's making a point about 'serious' bands, in defence of AC/DC's rawness.

"I don't know anybody who's gone to see any of those serious bands who've enjoyed it. They may say it was great, that the music was good, but somewhere during that set they were bored and were too scared to admit it. If I went to see somebody that was 'musical', I'd yawn my head off. I'd end up walking out to the bar. Bands like Yes would be a bore to see, unless they had some Sheila strippin' off. Well, even then, Hawkwind done that! That shows ya what they gotta resort to and yet people take them seriously. Yes would probably come on with a fantastic light show. I've never seen them, but they probably use a light show to cover up that they're bored and their music is borin', and they're not makin' people jump!"

This is what I would call a rant, so we continue. Bon is obviously sleeping with one ear on alert because when I suggest that maybe AC/DC are indulgent too, he's on me like a flea.

"With rock'n'roll self-indulgence, the audience gets off on it," he slurs. "With a Yes self-indulgence, the audience is sittin' out there baffled. They don't know what the fuck is happn'n.

"When you're playin' clever stuff, you're being self-indulgent and expectin' the audience to cop what you're playin'. In rock'n'roll, which is what we play, you're givin' the audience what you're doin'."

With that, Bon slides back into his stupor again, so I mention to Angus that there can't be many bands that he does like. "I was never interested in modern-day sorta music," he says. "I get off on all the old stuff – Elvis, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Jerry Lee, swing records, Louis Armstrong and stuff like that. All the other stuff seems poor in comparison, even the production. You put Little Richard's *Tutti Frutti* on and put the wildest thing from today next to it and it sounds timid in comparison."

That's what they call progress, Angus, I suggest.

"Well, they must have progressed the wrong way. I'll tell you when it stopped getting' good – when the Rolling Stones put out *Jumpin' Jack Flash* and *Street Fightin' Man*. Past that, there's nuthin'. Led Zeppelin and all that have just been poor imitators of the Who and bands like that. That's when I reckon it stopped. The rest I wouldn't even call progressive."

Angus, it seems, is off again. And I swear that Scott is smiling in his sleep as he listens subconsciously.

"Guys like Jeff Beck and John McLaughlin, all those guys should be playin' jazz. And they wouldn't even get a good run in those bands, because there's guys that've been playin' that stuff for fifty years and would blow them off. People like Beck shouldn't even be thinkin' of callin' themselves rock'n'roll, they're into a different thing. Get them off. Put them all away.

"You get a guy nowadays to come out on a piano like Jerry Lee Lewis, kickin' the fuck outta his piano and rippin' his shirt off, and I guarantee that within a few years the guy would be one of the biggest things going. If I could play the piano I'd be doin' it!"

Which sounded all a bit anachronistic, I felt. Surely AC/DC weren't advocating re-churning old stuff? No, Young emphasised, not rechurning – reinventing.

"It's not repeating. It's about just playin' what's always been there. A good song, well played, well arranged and well presented, wild and excitin' for a rock band. The rest aren't rock'n'roll – they're wrong to call themselves that. They're just little hip things, Yer punk ting. That's just a hip thing. It's nuffin'."

And lest he's leaving anyone out, Angus saves his last blast for the biggies – Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones.

The first time he heard Zeppelin play 'real' rock'n'roll, he said, was on their fourth album, specifically on the track *Rock And Roll*. "I've seen that band live and they were on for three hours. For two and a half hours, they bored the audience, and then at the end they pull out old rock'n'roll numbers to get the crowd movin'. That's sick. They're supposed to be the most excitin' rock'n'roll band in the world, them and the Stones, and they're not playin' it.

"The Rolling Stones get up and play soul music these days, and this is supposed to be rock'n'roll. Leave that to the people who do it best, the black people. If the Stones played what they do best, they'd be a helluva lot better and they'd probably find themselves at ease."

And so we leave Angus with that, swearing that AC/DC will never wander down that route, and that they will always be true to their roots.

Meanwhile, on the bed, Bon gently snores and dreams of another day in AC/DC paradise…

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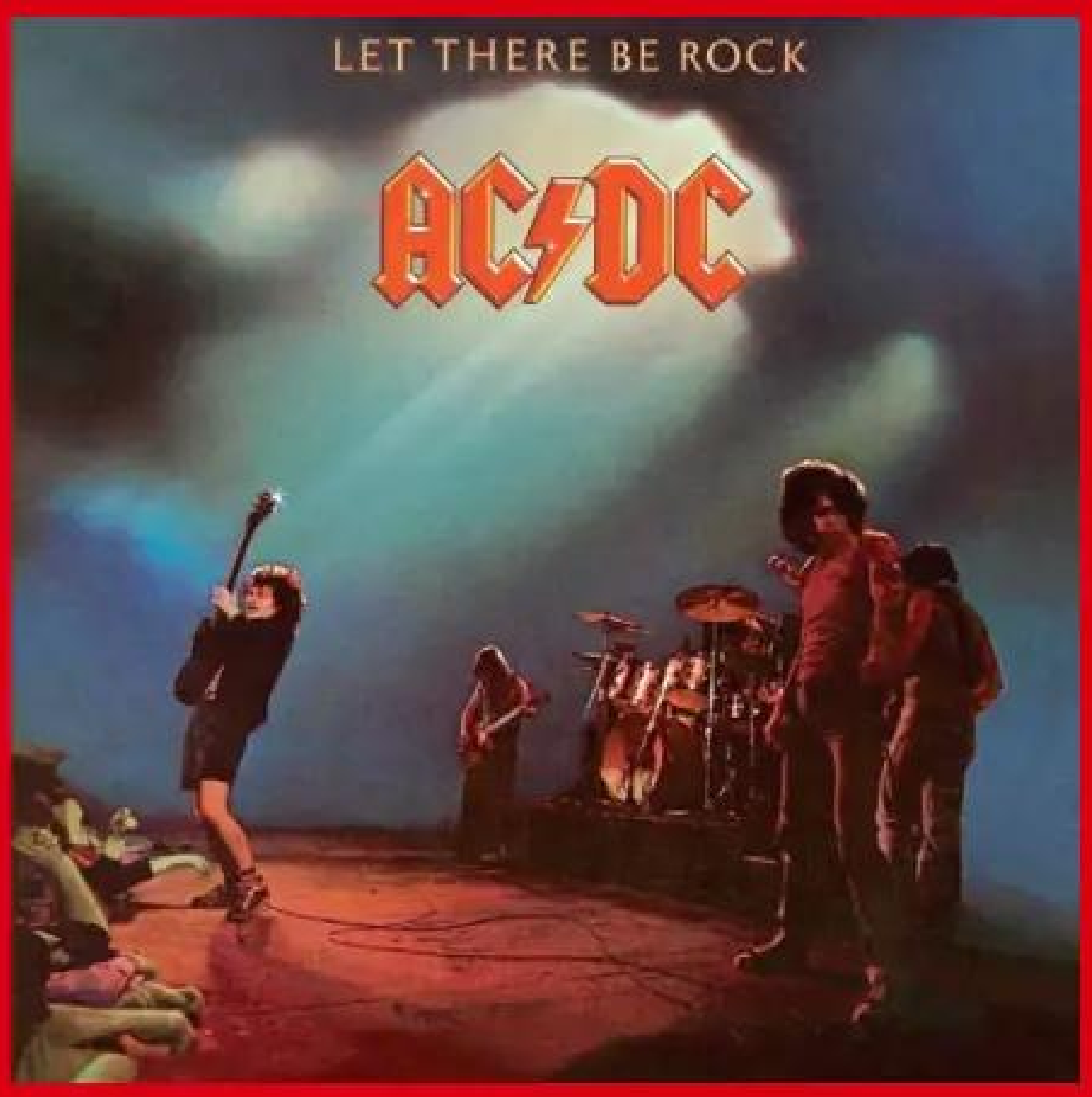

LET THERE BE ROCK
AC/DC

LET THERE BE ROCK 1977

AC/DC
POWERAGE

AC/DC
IF YOU WANT BLOOD

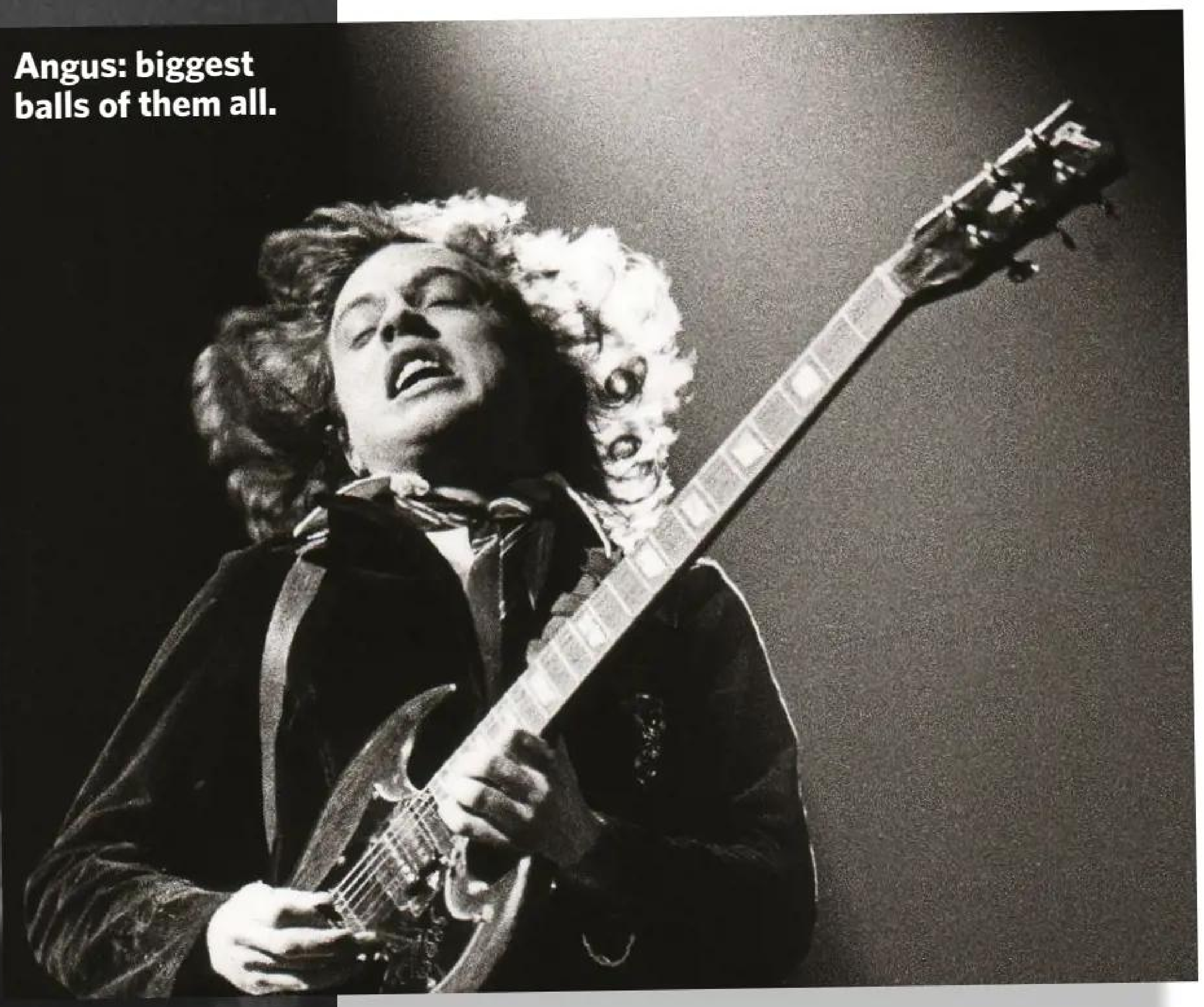
"WE'LL SHOW 'EM!"

POWERAGE 1978

IF YOU WANT BLOOD 1978

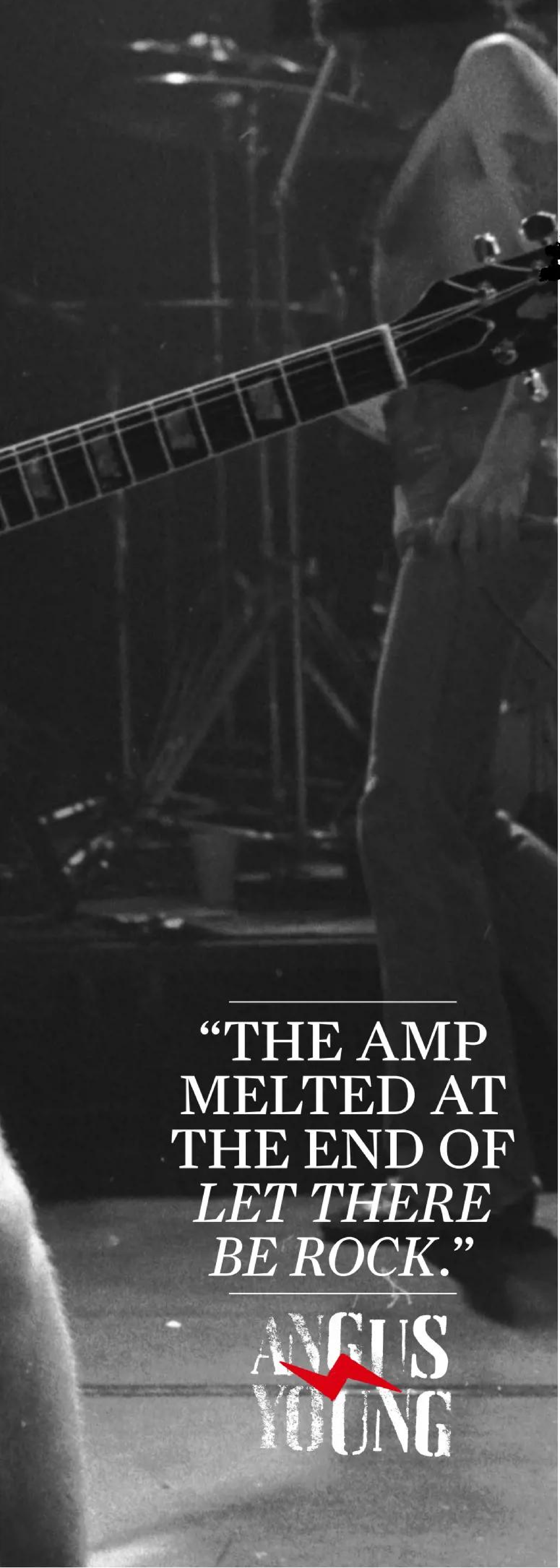
With stalling sales and an unsupportive label, there was only one thing left for AC/DC to do: rock. Harder than ever before.

Words: **Mick Wall** Photo: **Dean Simmon**



Angus: biggest balls of them all.

ROB VERHORST/REDFERNS/GETTY



“THE AMP MELTED AT THE END OF *LET THERE BE ROCK.*”

ANGUS YOUNG

After having the *Dirty Deeds* album refused a US release by their record company because the suits simply didn’t think it was good enough, it was do or die time for AC/DC.

In typically reactionary fashion, however, what the Young brothers decided to do was not to soften their approach – as Atlantic had insisted, in order to gain radio play in the US – but to double down and produce their hardest, most uncompromising album yet. It was a two-fingered salute to their critics, defiantly titled *Let There Be Rock*.

“There was always a siege mentality about the band,” says their then bassist Mark Evans. “Once we found out that Atlantic had knocked us back, the attitude was: ‘Fuck them! Who the fuck do they think they are?’”

You can hear that attitude throughout the album, beginning with the sound of a whisky-guzzling Bon counting in the intro to the knee-trembling *Go Down* – a song about a real-life groupie from Melbourne named Ruby (as in Ruby Lips, though her actual name was Wendy), known for her fondness, apparently, for *‘lickin’ at that lickin’ stick’*.

There was also a detectable edge, a nasty side to some of the material, like *Dog Eat Dog* (*‘Businessman when you make a deal/Do you know who you can trust?’*) and *Bad Boy Boogie* (*‘I said up/They said down/I do the bad boy boogie/All over town’*) where Bon’s sneer is matched by Angus’s furious soloing, the rest of the band pounding away, as if speaking directly to the suits in New York.

Not that they’d lost their sense of humour, of course – the tremendous title track saw to that. Buzz Bidstrup, drummer with The Angels, recalls visiting the studio and seeing Angus recording the solo while “climbing all over the amps and rolling around the floor”. Angus later recalled seeing smoke “pouring out of the fucking amp” at the end of the *Let There Be Rock* take. “It melted,” he cackled.

But, for Mark Evans, the real hero of that track was Phil Rudd. “We did two takes, and at the end of the first one I remember thinking: ‘That’s the end of Phil for a couple of hours.’ But Phil said: ‘Let’s go again now.’ I thought the guy was gonna fucking explode! They used the second take.”

The whole album sounds like it’s on the verge of spilling over into total chaos. Recorded as-live, mistakes were tolerated if the vibe was strong enough, the energy audibly crackling over the speakers on tracks like the romping *Overdose*, with its faltering, feedback-heavy intro, and *Hell Ain’t A Bad Place To Be*, with its huge, bitch-slapping riff.

“To me it’s like the band’s *Brown Sugar*,” says Evans. “I mean, if you’re a purist and like the guitars being completely in tune and things being completely studio-sterile, that song’s gonna kill you, cos the guitars are whomping all over the place out of tune. But it’s just got that nasty, gritty feel about it that says AC/DC.”

They saved the best for last, though, with *Whole Lotta Rosie*, about another real-life friend of Bon’s lickin’ stick. This one, though, *‘weighing in at nineteen stone’*. With its staccato, looking-for-trouble intro and roguish vocal, *Whole Lotta Rosie* was to become AC/DC’s signature song: typifying the band at their most animalistic, yet transcendent, in the same way *Whole Lotta Love*, from which it cheekily pastiches its title, had done for Led Zeppelin.

There was even one track deemed too sordid for poor American ears: *Crabsody In Blue*, a swinging blues based on Bon’s sexual history since finding fame: *‘Well, they move on down and they crawl around…’* It was replaced in the US with *Problem Child*, from *Dirty Deeds*. Poor loves.

Let There Be Rock was the first AC/DC album not to crack the Australian Top 10. In the UK it reached No.17, in the US it didn’t even make the Hot 100. Nevertheless, it remains one of their best – the first truly classic, no-duds-allowed AC/DC album.

For a while, the chances of them making an equally fine follow-up seemed slim. Mark Evans was given the boot, to be replaced by Englishman Cliff Williams – who couldn’t get a visa to perform in Australia. Atlantic in New York would have liked the group to give Bon the boot too, now blaming his vocals for the band’s lack of radio play. But again, the Young brothers decided to knuckle down and prove everybody wrong. Which they did, quite spectacularly, with *Powerage*.

By the time they were ready to go back into the studio in January 1978, Malcolm and Angus knew that this time they would have to do more than go in empty-handed, throwing it all together as best they could in a fusillade of alcohol and fags and making-it-up-as-you-go-along Aussie spunk. *Powerage* would have to be their heaviest record yet, and also their most musical. It would need to show what AC/DC could do, demonstrating the one thing critics had got into the habit of expecting them not to achieve: growth.

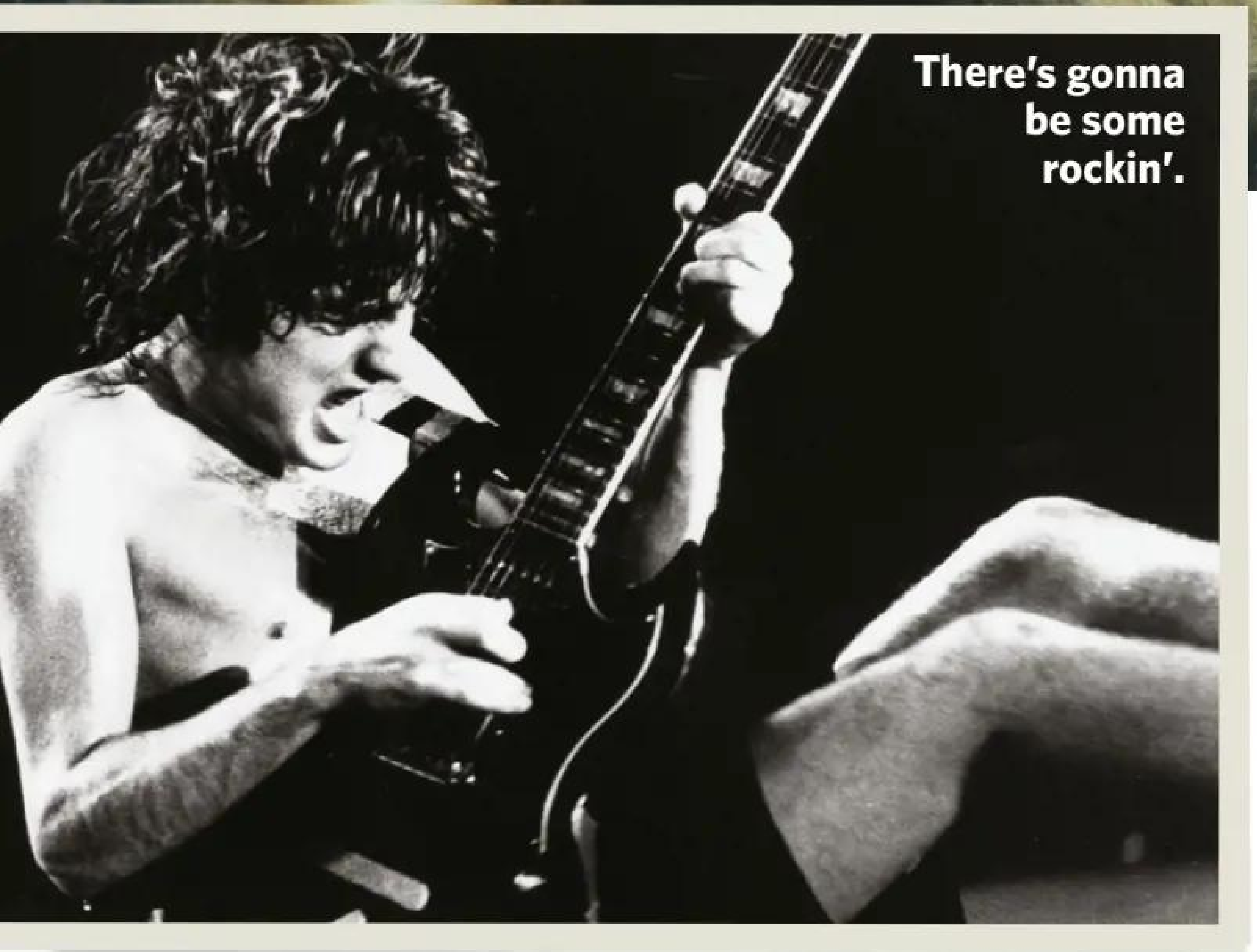
“They were never shy, but *Powerage* was where Malcolm, in particular, really wanted to show they were good musicians too,” recalls their then manager Michael Browning.

As a result, *Powerage* would take longer to record than previous AC/DC albums, with ad-hoc sessions spread across several weeks at the start of the year. Experiencing fully for the first time the midnight oil-burning intensity of AC/DC in the studio, Cliff Williams, for one, was convinced *Powerage* was special.

Even though the sessions were spread out, when they started work in the studio “we got there and got down, and did the long-hour days… It was really a tremendous experience.”

Conceived as a showcase that would place AC/DC right up there with the American superstars they were now sharing stages with, *Powerage* was split down the middle between yet more ton-up AC/DC classics such as *Down*

Bon Scott reluctantly entertains some female friends of the band.



There's gonna be some rockin'.

WARING ABBOTT/GETTY IMAGES

Payment Blues, and more elliptical tracks such as *What's Next To The Moon*.

In the former, the difference in mood is pinpointed by the change in perspective of Bon's lyrics. He was still writing about the long way to the top, but no longer self-mythologising, talking instead of *'Feeling like a paper cup/Floating down a storm drain'*. The latter, with its circular guitar figure replacing the juddering block chords of yore, was the most transcendent moment on any AC/DC album yet, the lyrics staring past love and pain, focusing instead on that thing just out of reach.

Whether intentional or not, it had the same yo-yoing dynamic throughout its nine tracks: one moment a perfect-10 rock monster like *Riff Raff*, its crazed, spiralling riff belying its solitary verse about being *'Down in Mexico'*, the next moment another seductively mid-paced stroller built around a tight, almost pop guitar figure: *Gone Shootin*. This time, though, the subject matter is truly murky. A song about a girl who *'sure is loaded'* and *'never says bye bye'*, it's a direct reference to Bon's on-off relationship with his girlfriend Silver, the stoned travelling woman who is permanently *'gone, gone, gone'*.

Of the remaining tracks, the lines between old-school, go-get-'em AC/DC and new, more measured, see-what-we-can-do AC/DC are pleasingly blurred. *Sin City* begins like classic AC/DC – towering intro, all-guns-blazing riff – but again the story is much deeper. On the surface, about a gambler going *'in to win'* in Las Vegas, it's also a metaphor for the assault AC/DC were now intent on making on the US charts. With its low-slung guitars and chugging drums, *Gimme A Bullet* sounds more like the Lynyrd Skynyrd number it almost steals its title from than anything AC/DC had put down on vinyl before. Again, the song – about a girl who tells her guy: *'Now you go your way and I'll go mine'* – seems to refer back to Silver, with Bon crying for *a 'bullet to bite on'* to help him with his pain.

The final two tracks, *Up To My Neck In You* and *Kicked In The Teeth*, also exemplify this new dynamic. Although both date back to the earlier *Powerage* sessions of six months before, only the latter sounds like it comes from an earlier era, Bon literally screaming over the intro about a *'two-faced woman'* telling *'two-faced lies'*.

Up To My Neck In You sounds more modern, Bon once more up to his neck in whisky-women and good-bad times, but the guitars and drums move with a staggered grace that has more to do with the Rolling Stones than with the wall of block chords that AC/DC had previously relied on.

There was one other track, *Cold Hearted Man*, but that only made it to the very earliest vinyl editions of the album released in Britain – and these days it isn't included on any of the CD or downloadable editions. In truth, it's no loss. It's the track that replaced it – the deliberately pop *Rock'n'roll Damnation*, recorded at Atlantic's insistence, again to try to bait American radio – that caused the real controversy, at least among the band, who genuinely hated it. For the rest of us it was simply one more catchy tune.

> "THE BAND'S ATTITUDE TO ATLANTIC WAS: 'FUCK THEM!'"
>
> MARK EVANS

But when *Powerage* also failed to excite the charts in America, Atlantic were ready to throw in the towel. Then someone had a brainwave: how about if they did a Kiss? That is, release a best-of package under the guise of a live album, the way the similarly radio-challenged Kiss had done with *Alive* and *Alive II*?

So it was that on the third night of their UK tour in April 1978, headlining Glasgow Apollo, they recorded the show for what would become the first AC/DC live album: *If You Want Blood You've Got It*. Along with other dates recorded that summer in the US and some going back to a 1976 tour of Australia, *If You Want Blood* would serve as both documentary proof of AC/DC's growing status as one of the premier league live rock acts in the world, and as a de facto best-of.

Producers George Young and Harry Vanda had done a good job of sprucing it up for mainstream consumption, mixing out obvious mistakes, choosing the best takes of the tracks, cleaning up the lead and backing vocals and bringing the whole package up to studio standard, as was common for officially released live albums, then as now.

These were just the trimmings, though, to a dish that needed little adornment. AC/DC live were a genuinely thrilling proposition. Released on Friday 13, *If You Want Blood* would include all the obvious crowd-pleasers like *The Jack* (its strictly live, 'dirty' lyrics included on record for the first time); *Whole Lotta Rosie* (with a new crowd chant of "Angus! Angus!" over the juddering intro recorded for the first time, thereby embedding it forever into the consciousness of all future generations of AC/DC concert-goers); and lengthy, barnstorming encores of *Let There Be Rock* (distinguished by the very real roar of approval from the Glasgow crowd at seeing the band return to the stage wearing Scotland football shirts); and *Rocker*, cleverly edited down from its usual 12-minutes-plus to a more radio-accommodating three minutes dead.

As a result, *If You Want Blood* finally opened the doors of the UK Top 20 for AC/DC, eventually climbing as high as No.13.

America, though, still stubbornly refused to buy it. What would the band do now?

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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SHOT DOWN IN FLAMES

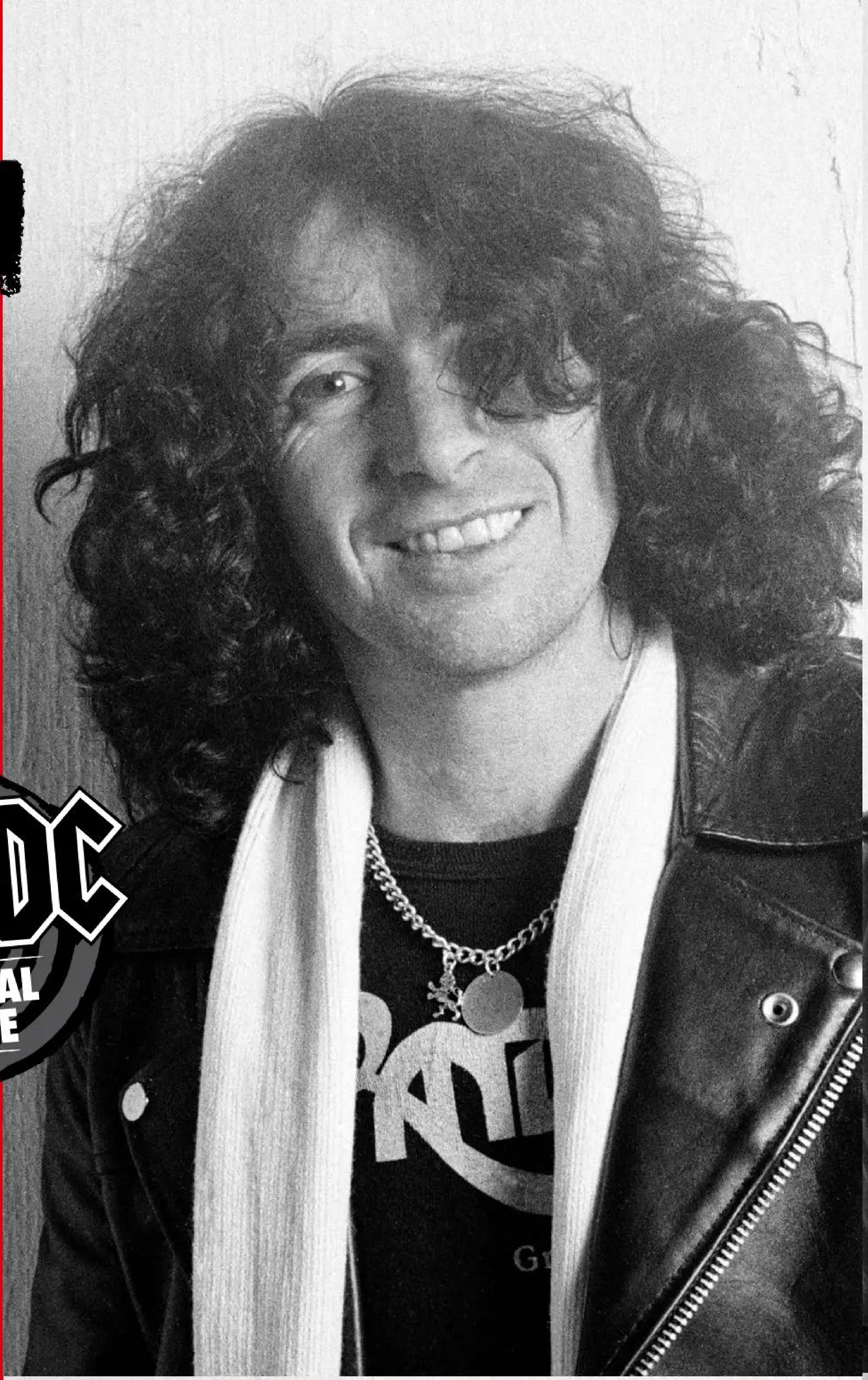
AC/DC THE FINAL SALUTE

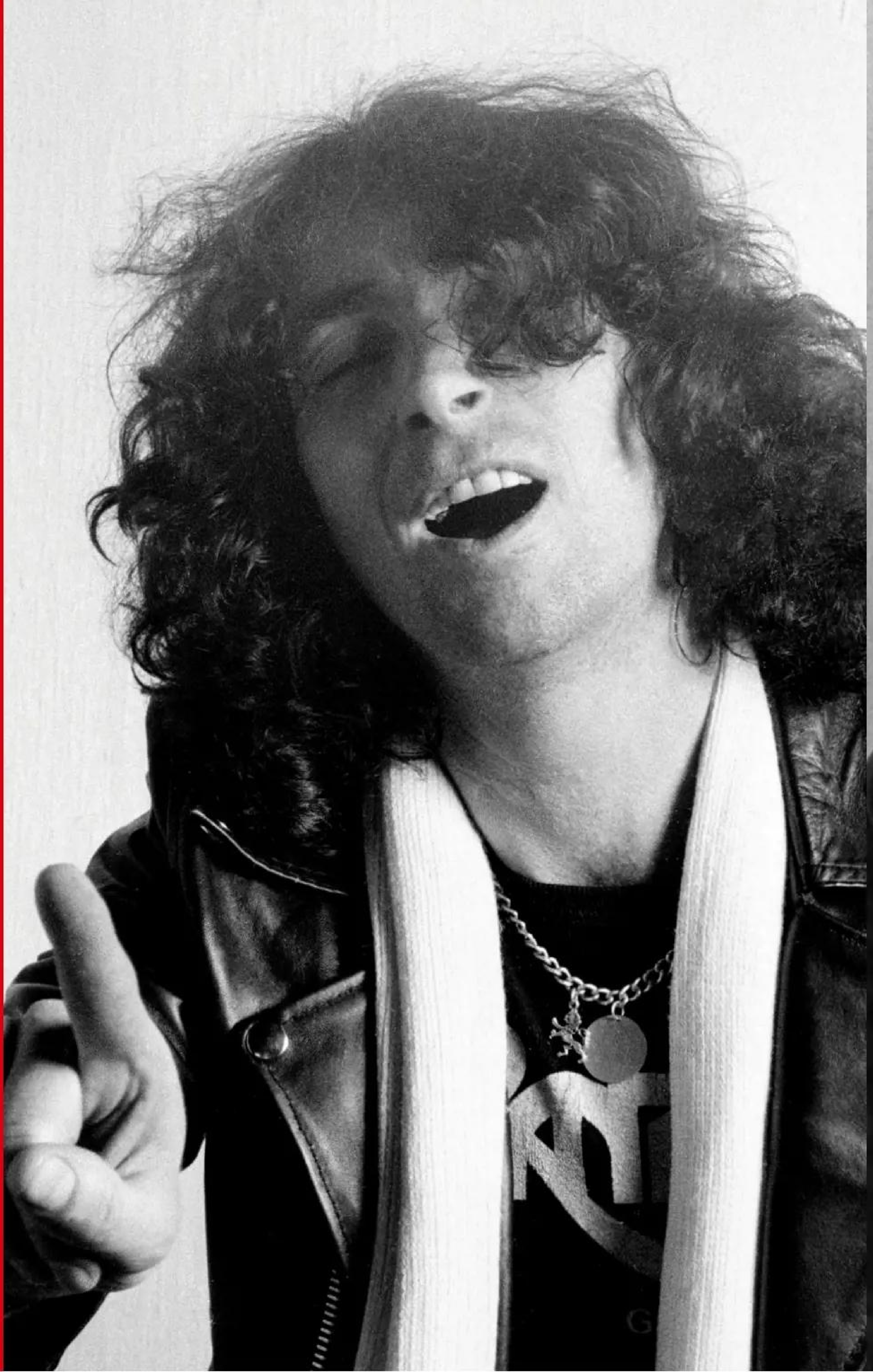
SATANIC MAJESTY

HIGHWAY TO HELL 1979

Mixing their huge riffs with tunes the devil would sell his soul for, the band set off down the *Highway To Hell*, and onto the road to global stardom.

Words: **Mark Blake** Photos: **Eric Mistler/Dalle/IconicPix**





Hellraiser: Bon Scott's parting shots for AC/DC.

In October 2003, AC/DC played a one-off date at London's Hammersmith Apollo, or to use its correct title, the Hammersmith Odeon. The last time they'd performed here was November 1980. Back then, this writer was in the cheap seats with a bunch of school friends, peering at the band through a heaving sea of hair and denim, nostrils filled with that memorable rock gig aroma – cigarettes, patchouli oil, beer and armpits.

Scroll forward to 2003 and while some things, mercifully, had changed, the euphoria that greeted *Highway To Hell* had not. What is it about this song that can make even the most reserved men and women (although it's usually men) start bellowing '*Hey Satan! Paid my dues…*' like they're possessed by an evil spirit and speaking in tongues? It's all down to the song's timeless power. Since its release in summer 1979, *Highway To Hell* has been an entry-level song and album for generations of AC/DC fans. It was the first AC/DC album to have those really big tunes and choruses. And, as great as *Back In Black* is, without *Highway* there'd be no *Hells Bells*, no *You Shook Me All Night Long*.

For all their bravado at the time, AC/DC knew when to compromise. And *Highway To Hell* was a brilliant compromise. When they pitched up at London's Roundhouse Studios that year, they were under orders from Atlantic Records to come up with a hit. They'd already tried – and failed – with producer Eddie Kramer in Miami. Kramer questioned Bon Scott's ability to sing; Scott claimed Kramer "couldn't produce a healthy fart".

In desperation, Atlantic paired them with the relatively unknown Mutt Lange, who'd recently turned *5-7-0-5* by City Boy (the charity shop 10cc) and *Rat Trap* by Boomtown Rats into hits. Both songs demonstrated Mutt's uncanny gift for panning commercial gold from an unlikely source, which is precisely what he'd do with AC/DC. From the title track's opening riff – a cheeky steal from Free's *All Right Now* – to Bon Scott's strangulated howl on *Night Prowler*, this is AC/DC doing what they do best, while Mutt works his voodoo magic.

The first thing he did was *really* tune their guitars. The second was to make sure everything, be it Malcolm Young's metronomic right hand or Phil Rudd's gunshot snare, could be heard properly. Everything here is super-tight and tweaked to perfection. "He was meticulous," marvelled Angus Young. "Even Bon was impressed with how he could get his voice to sound."

> "MUTT WAS METICULOUS – EVEN BON WAS IMPRESSED."
>
> ANGUS YOUNG

But instead of diminishing AC/DC's power, Mutt's perfectionism had the reverse effect. It made everything sound more brutal. In fact, listening to *Highway To Hell* is like being run over by a state-of-the-art tank.

The producer's final trick was to crank up those backing vocals. AC/DC's old production duo, Vanda & Young, had tried something similar on the 1978 single *Rock'n'Roll Damnation*. Similar, but not as big. Mutt's backing vocal choir transformed the choruses to *Girl's Got Rhythm* and the bumping, grinding *Walk All Over You* into terrace chants.

What Mutt does on *Highway To Hell*, then, is locate AC/DC's inner pop group – after all, they'd been weaned on such hitmakers as Chuck Berry, the Stones and The Who – but without sacrificing their souls in the process. He does it on the title track and again on the single *Touch Too Much*, a gnarly sex anthem with an earworm of a chorus.

Touch Too Much contains both a textbook leering Bon Scott lyric ('*She wanted it hard/Wanted it fast/She liked it done medium rare*') and one of his silliest – '*She had the face of an angel/Smilin' with sin/The body of Venus with arms.*' As Spinal Tap's David St Hubbins once said: "It's such a fine line…" Scott sometimes overstepped it by slipping into crass toilet-wall poetry, but '*Venus with arms*' never grows old.

If short on inspiration, Scott usually falls back on singing about the rapturous power of sex or rock'n'roll. Or both, in the case of *Get It Hot*, side two's amiable filler, which condenses the singer's life philosophy into two minutes and 35 seconds. '*Nobody's playing Manilow*' on Bon's radio as he's '*moving down the motorway*' with '*a whole lotta booze*' and '*a sweet little number*'. He sounds like the happiest man alive, which seems awfully sad, considering he'd be dead less than a year later.

Although their cartoon shtick and seaside postcard humour dominate, AC/DC never let you forget they have a mean streak. *Beating Around The Bush* allows Angus to indulge in some manic guitar heroics, while Scott's angry, stuttered vocal is a classic 'woman done me wrong' rant.

Similarly, on *If You Want Blood (You've Got It)*, the best song on *Highway To Hell* nobody usually mentions, he sounds truly vitriolic, screaming about '*the shit that they toss to you*' – who's tossing this shit? We never find out – over a riff so spine-tingling, AC/DC recycled it a year later on *Shoot To Thrill*. When the band played this song at the 2003 Hammersmith show, Brian Johnson couldn't muster the same venom or conviction. There are some AC/DC songs that are just Bon's, and this is one of them.

Truthfully, *If You Want Blood* is also the last great song on *Highway To Hell*. Even Scott doesn't sound fully committed to *Love Hungry Man* – think: less hungry, more mildly peckish – though full marks to Cliff Williams for that funky, nimble-fingered bassline.

AC/DC albums have always traditionally included a slow blues (see: *Ride On*, *The Jack*, etc), and *Highway To Hell* is no exception. But *Night Prowler*, with its queasy lyric about a stalker who murders women in their beds, always did seem a bit charmless, even in 1979.

Then, after the night crawler has done his worst and the song grinds to a halt, a giggly Bon mutters, 'Shazbot, nanu nanu', actor Robin Williams's catchphrase in the 70s TV comedy *Mork & Mindy*. It's a nice touch.

Scott's last words perfectly sum up both *Highway To Hell* and AC/DC. As supported by his grinning face looming out of the side of the album cover while everyone else tries to look satanic, Bon's message is always: never take any of this too seriously. Listening again now, you realise how right he was. But like the song says, Bon Scott '*paid his dues*'. It's just a crying shame he never made it to *Highway To Hell*'s mythical '*promised land*'.

40
YEARS OF
HIGH VOLTAGE ROCK'N'ROLL

1979 The Making Of Highway To Hell!

THE DEVIL'S OWN

A make-or-break album, ***Highway To Hell*** proved to be the fast-track to superstardom for AC/DC, but recording it pushed the band to their limits…

Words: **Mick Wall**

A bitterly cold January afternoon in New York, 1979: a top-level meeting at the headquarters of Atlantic Records on Rockefeller Plaza. Present are company president Jerry Greenberg, the label's head of A&R Michael Kleffner and AC/DC manager Michael Browning. Subject under discussion: the abject failure of AC/DC to crack the American market, and what to do about it.

Despite their initial success at home in Australia and subsequent career lift-off in Britain and Europe, no AC/DC album had gained any traction whatsoever in America. One of them – 1976's *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* – wasn't even released there. Worse still, their recent live album, *If You Want Blood You've Got It*, which Atlantic had banked on "doing a Kiss" – breaking a band with a great live act but zero visibility on mainstream radio, the way *Alive* had for Simmons and co. – had been a disaster sales-wise.

Which is why Browning had been summoned to Atlantic HQ for what he describes today as "the discussions". Maybe it was the singer, suggested Greenberg, not for the first time. Maybe he didn't have the right voice for American radio. Maybe they would do better with someone else? "Not in a blunt 'either do it or we drop you' type way," says Browning now. "But there was that kind of conversation going on."

When the manager refused to relent about Bon, it was Kleffner's turn to chip in. Maybe the band needed a new producer, said the A&R man. Studio svengalis Harry Vanda and George Young had helped steer the band this far but perhaps they had done all they could. The problem was that not only were Vanda and Young still in the production hotseat, but George Young was the elder brother of AC/DC guitarists Malcolm and Angus Young. It was a family business. In the Atlantic boardroom, Michael Browning weighed up the options.

AC/DC
HIGHWAY TO HELL

"It was obvious something had to be done," he says. "George had been fabulous for them but he hadn't been to America for years and American FM radio had a sound you had to experience to really understand."

The meeting ended with the three men agreeing that AC/DC needed a new producer to crack America. A week later, Michael Kleffner flew to Sydney to break the news to George Young: if he really cared about his brothers and their band, he would have to step aside as producer. George didn't take the news well, but Kleffner was adamant: for Atlantic to continue investing in AC/DC's future, they needed new blood with them in the studio. Grudgingly, George Young agreed to step down.

So it was in early 1979 that the wheels were set in motion – albeit with no little friction – for what would prove to be the most pivotal year of AC/DC's career, and for the album that would change their destiny: *Highway To Hell*.

> *"IF WE'D KNOWN MUTT LANGE HAD PRODUCED THE BOOMTOWN RATS, WE'D NEVER HAVE LET HIM THROUGH THE DOOR."*
> ***MALCOLM YOUNG***

AC/DC get swept away by both fans and media at The Oakland Coliseum in 1978.

Even as he was speaking to George Young, Michael Kleffner had a replacement producer in mind: Eddie Kramer. Within a week of their conversation, the latter was on a plane to Sydney to began work with AC/DC.

The thirty-six-year-old Kramer was no novice, having previously worked with Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin and Kiss, but the sessions were doomed from the start. With all three Young brothers still fuming at George's unexpected ejection and Kramer's subsequent appointment by the suits in New York, AC/DC were ready to go to war. The situation wasn't helped by an upturn in Bon Scott's drinking. Always heavy, it had become excessive even by his standards.

"I went there," says Kramer, "hung out with them, tried to do some demos, and realised that there was an obvious difficulty with the singer too. He had the most incredible voice but trying to keep him in check from his drinking was a very tough call. But I think more than anything, the band resented me being foisted onto them. It was like sticking a pin into them."

When Kramer insisted that the band decamp to his regular studio in Miami, the resentment grew. The producer's task was undermined further by the fact that Malcolm and Angus were allegedly sending demo tapes to George back in Australia behind Kramer's back, which the elder Young would critique – negatively.

After a series of increasingly angry phone calls from Malcolm, in which the guitarist threatened bloodshed if Kramer wasn't fired, Browning realised he needed to make a drastic change, and quickly. He had another producer in mind – thirty-one-year-old hotshot Mutt Lange, who had recently produced The Boomtown Rats' No.1 hit, *I Don't Like Mondays*. Browning approached his manager, Clive Calder, to ask if Lange would be interested in

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Smiles and snarls: the now iconic cover of *Highway To Hell* – minus horns.

working with AC/DC. "Clive was going, 'No, no. they haven't got a big enough base,'" he says. "But I just hammered them and by the end of the night I called Malcolm back and said: 'It's cool, I've got Mutt Lange.' He said: 'Who's he?'"

Though neither Browning nor the Young brothers could have known it, it was to be a game-changing decision for all involved. Born in Mufulira, Northern Rhodesia – now Zambia – in November 1948, Robert John Lange was a middle-class kid who made his name as a guitarist on neighbouring South Africa's miniaturised music scene before stepping behind the mixing desk. As a producer, he was a perfectionist, noted for making musicians play their parts countless times until they got things absolutely right. It was a world away from AC/DC's no-fuss approach. When the two parties met each other at a pre-production rehearsal in London in March 1979, neither side knew or, frankly, cared much about the other.

"Mutt turns up with a mop of curly hair and green wellies on, and they're all going to me, 'Who the fuck's that?'" recalls Ian Jeffery, AC/DC's tour manager at the time.

If Lange had been apprised of the situation vis-a-vis George Young, he showed no sign. All the Young brothers knew of Lange was what Michael Browning had told them: that he was "a genius" – the sort of smarmy introduction that had them both curling their lips. Malcolm later joked that if he'd known their new producer was then enjoying his first major UK chart success with the Boomtown Rats, "we'd never have let him through the door".

These initial suspicions didn't stop the band and their new producer from knuckling down to work. Basic tracking began in earnest on AC/DC's new album on Saturday March 24 at Roundhouse Studios in Chalk Farm, North London, with all of the recording completed exactly three weeks later, on April 14.

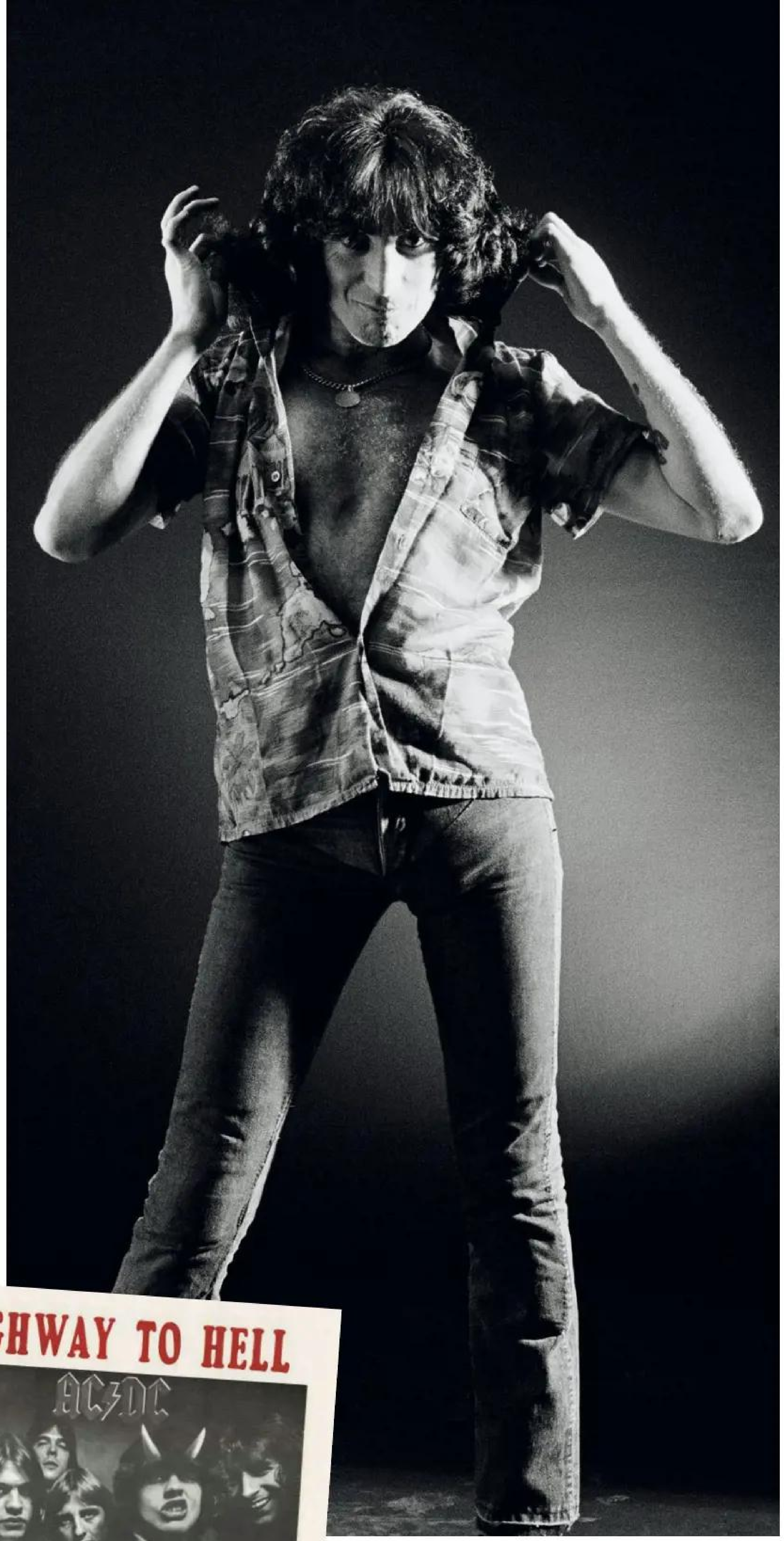
The first track they worked on was *Highway To Hell* itself. The instantly arresting guitar-drum intro had been demoed with just Angus grinding away on guitar while Malcolm bashed at the drums. All was nearly lost when an engineer took the only cassette of it home, where his young son playfully unravelled it. Fortunately, Bon, who was always rewinding his own worn-out cassettes, put it back together the following day and the tune that was about to transform all their lives was restored.

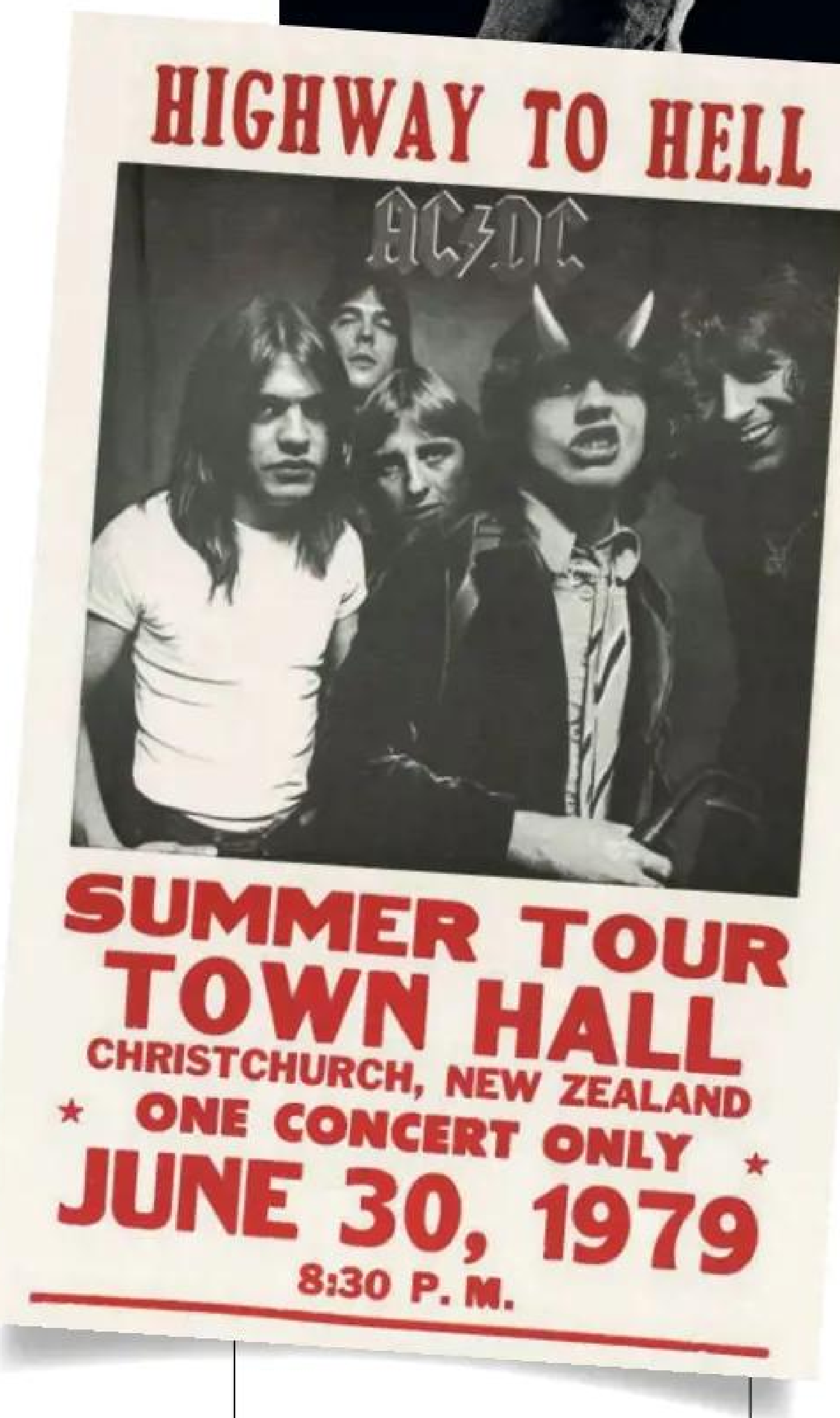
The fact that the intro sounded like Free's *All Right Now* was not lost on Lange, who hired Free's old engineer Tony Platt to help him mix the final edits. "He was looking for someone that would give it that kind of dry, punchy rock thing," says Platt now. "That feeling of time and space."

It was a sound that characterised the whole album. Tracks like *Touch Too Much* – retrieved from a flailing, earlier incarnation and remade into a top-notch toe-tapper – and the pulsing *Get It Hot* were, on the surface, cornerstone heavy rockers, yet, as Platt points out, they had proper *groove*. Even the scorching *If You Want Blood (You've Got It)* was impossible to listen to without moving yourself out of your seat. "One of Mutt's things that he brought to AC/DC was how to really work a groove," he says. "They may have been an out-and-out rock band but you could now dance to their tunes."

George Young had always encouraged his charges to simply give it their best shot and damn such niceties as tuning and time-keeping, but Lange insisted on everything being in perfect balance, melodically, rhythmically and harmonically, so when each song exploded into action, it did so against a backdrop that contrasted rather than competed for attention.

In this way, he even coaxed from them tracks that took their foot off the pedal long enough to almost be called ballads. In the case of *Love Hungry Man*, the beat was essentially no different to *Highway To Hell*, but the idea was much less in-your-face (although Malcolm and Angus came to see it as a bridge too far, refusing even to play it live). With the final track, *Night Prowler*, Lange even took them back to the kind of electric blue melancholy they had only dared to chance once before – on Bon's totemic *Ride On*.





Top: Bon Scott in the spotlight. Top right: AC/DC live in Chicago, September 1978.

GETTY X3

But if *Night Prowler* musically exceeded its elegiac descendent, Bon's lyrics were something else: the tale of the beast that waits for you to *'turn out the light'* before it *'makes a mess of you'*. If the music hadn't been so convincing, the song might have fallen into Alice Cooper-type schlock-horror. But Lange's production ruled out any thoughts of theatrical contrivance: it just sounded mean and dirty.

Lyrically, other tracks, like the bouncing *Girl's Got Rhythm* and *Beating Around The Bush* – the latter remodelled from the discarded *Dirty Deeds* track *Backseat Confidential*, with a new, flintier riff barely one remove from that of Fleetwood Mac's *Oh Well* – came straight out of the same bottom drawer as the rest of Bon's dirty-mind fantasies. But musically, this was a whole other universe. The craft that went into *Walk All Over You* was like a George Young production in reverse, Lange introducing a more sophisticated set of dynamics that turned an otherwise average blues romp into something touched by greatness. Similarly, *Shot Down In Flames* was pop-rock taken to its zenith.

"Mutt took them through so many changes," says Ian Jeffery, who was there at many of the sessions. "I remember one day Bon coming in with his lyrics to *If You Want Blood*. He starts doing it and he's struggling, you know? There's more fucking breath than voice coming out. Mutt says to him, 'Listen, you've got to co-ordinate your breathing.' Bon was like, 'You're so fucking good, cunt, you do it!' Mutt sat in his seat and did it without standing up! That was when they all went, 'What the fucking hell we dealing with here?'"

Lange also taught Angus some useful lessons, instructing him to play his solos while sitting next to the producer. "Mutt said: 'Sit here and I'll tell you what I want you to play,'" recalls Jeffery. "Angus was like, 'You fucking will, will ya?' But he sat next to Mutt and Mutt didn't force it on him, just kind of pointed at the fretboard and, 'Here, this…' and 'Hold that…' and 'Now go into that…' It was the solo from *Highway To Hell*. It was fantastic! And that really stood them all to attention on Mutt too. He wasn't asking them to do anything he couldn't do himself, or getting on their case saying it's been wrong in the past; nothing like that. He really massaged them into what became that album."

Always first in and last out, Lange would sleep on the studio couch, working after everyone else had gone home, going through the day's performances, weighing, judging, discarding. Like a master finding his muse, AC/DC had provided the producer with his greatest canvas. Unlike the punk-conscious acts he'd toiled with previously in London, AC/DC not only could play, but they didn't give a fuck what anyone else might have to say about it after the fact. This time around there were no

> *“MUTT SAID: ‘SIT HERE AND I’LL TELL YOU WHAT I WANT YOU TO PLAY.’ ANGUS SAID: ‘YOU F*CKING WILL, WILL YA?!’”* **IAN JEFFERY**

sneaky tapes being sent back to George, either. While the elder Young still fumed over his removal from the studio, no one could argue with the results Lange was getting. Not that the band had forgotten about their brother’s sacking. But it would be their manager, Michael Browning, who bore the brunt of that deep hurt.

The first time Browning heard *Highway To Hell* was at home in New York, where Malcolm played it for him. “It was obvious from the word go it was something special,” says Browning. “I thought the title track was the absolute breakthrough they needed for America, and then we sort of got into the process of working out the cover and that sort of stuff.”

More to the point, the powers that be at Atlantic actually agreed. “We all liked what Mutt Lange did,” says Barry Bergman, the band’s American publisher at the time. “*Highway to Hell* made both AC/DC and Mutt Lange in America.”

Indeed, it launched Lange as the producer de jour in the US. But if everything was looking rosy again on the surface, as ever with AC/DC, there were rumblings that few saw coming. Atlantic decided they didn’t like the album title and tried to get them to change it. “They freaked,” remembered Malcolm. “But we told them to stick it.”

There were also concerns over the front cover. One option had Angus on his own on the cover, with toy devil horns on his head and a curly little forked devil’s tail, but that had been rejected by the band, says Ian Jeffery, “because it was fucking shite”. The band wanted to go with a nondescript line-up shot from the same session. The record company suggested they use the solo shot of Angus, but AC/DC wouldn’t be budged. “Who the fuck do they think they are?” spat Malcolm of the label.

Unfortunately for Browning, the ripples didn’t end there. Following what he calls “an unbelievable argument between me and the group” after a show on the subsequent tour, he was fired. “I don’t think they ever forgave me for helping move George out of the picture,” he says now.

Nevertheless, the result was AC/DC’s first major international hit album; their first to crack the US Top 20, eventually selling more than seven million copies; their first to get into the UK Top 10 and go Gold; and their first hit record back home in Australia for three years. *Highway To Hell* – both song and album – are now rightly considered all-time rock classics. It marked the start of a whole new era for AC/DC – and the beginning of the end for Bon Scott.

‘WON’T YOU CARRY ME HOME? DON’T LET ME LIE HERE IN ALL THIS BEER.’

FROM THE AC/DC SONG ‘CARRY ME HOME’

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

Bon Scott

A TOUCH TOO MUCH

On February 19, 1980, **AC/DC** frontman **Bon Scott** died in tragic circumstances. But mysteries surround the event to this day. **Geoff Barton** investigates Bon's last hours, the underworld he moved in, the disappearance of 'Alistair Kinnear' – the last man to see Bon alive – and the UFO connection.

Unless a person has suicidal tendencies, no one can choose where he or she dies. Least of all if that person is a rock star with a hard-drinking, fullon party-animal lifestyle. But having said that, there's something uniquely unnerving about the location of AC/DC frontman Bon Scott's sad demise.

It's an overcast day in early December 2004, and Classic Rock is making its way to a fateful setting: number 67 Overhill Road, in East Dulwich, South London. This is where Bon died, his body found abandoned in a Renault 5 car parked on the road just outside the address nearly 25 years ago.

We don't plan to rubberneck the scene like a bunch of sickos ogling a motorway pile-up, we just felt that we had to check it out before we began to write this story. You can call us morbid if you like; we'll just call it research.

It takes a while to get to East Dulwich from the centre of the city. You ride the Victoria-line Tube to Brixton and then hop on the single-decker P4 bus. You rumble through posh Dulwich Village, and the best part of half an hour later you alight outside the grim tenements of the Lordship Lane high-rise council estate.

You walk a little way up the street, turn left by the Harvester pub, and Overhill Road is the second turning on the right. The first thing you notice is a tatty building on the corner called the Rockbank Hotel, and you can't help but raise a wry smile.

Number 67 is at the top of steep gradient. And it ain't a pretty sight. It's a dour, featureless block of flats penned in by ranks of bright-green wheelie bins. It could have been transplanted here direct from the Eastern bloc.

There's a graffiti'd old ambulance parked directly outside the flats, which wipes that grin off your face straight away. To compound the irony, there's even a Renault behind it (although admittedly it's a Mégane, not a 5).

The trees that line Overhill Road are bare of leaves, but number 67's front garden is a thriving jungle of roots, weeds and hawthorns. There's litter all over the place. There's a wheelbarrow in the corner that had once been full of white paint, but which is now all dried-out and crusty.

The only evidence of anything remotely rock'n'roll-related is a skateboard propped up in the porch of the house next door. Of Bon Scott's heritage, there is not a sign.

But hang on a second… There's a scratchy silver plaque attached to the front of number 67. Tiptoe up the path, look closely, and you can see a handful of scribbled tributes grouped around the legend 'Flats 1-6'. The messages have been written in obvious haste: 'To Bon, from Björn in Sweden'; 'AC-Foxi-DC'; 'Ronald and Frank from Germany – cheers';

'To Bon, Szmery from Poland.' And that's it. Nothing else, apart from the drone of an aircraft; the distant sound of schoolchildren playing; brambles rustling dryly.

Overhill Road must have changed substantially since 1980, the year of Bon's death. Opposite number 67 is a big new apartment block called Dawson Heights that plainly wasn't around two and a half decades ago.

The Asian proprietor of a nearby Londis store has been in the country for only three months. He expresses surprise when he hears that a top rock star popped his clogs just down the road. The shopkeeper says he doesn't know of any local residents who would have been on the scene so many years ago.

A tradesman unloading a white van shrugs; he's only making a delivery, and he actually comes from Bromley. He's heard of AC/DC, but not of Bon Scott.

There's no reply from pressing any of the door buzzers stuck on number 67's front wall, just the empty hiss of the intercom, like static from a badly tuned radio.

You turn on your heels with an air of resignation and trudge back down the hill. Fine rain fills the air. As you grapple with your umbrella, you notice the silhouette of a bright-yellow dog stencilled on to the pavement. It's accompanied by a warning to owners not to allow their pets to shit on the pavement: Bag It & Bin It. Try as you might, you can't prevent a wry smile returning to your lips: Bag It & Bin It? It sounds like a bleedin' Bon Scott song title.

Ronald Belford Scott was born on July 9, 1946, in Kirriemuir, Scotland. He emigrated with his family to Australia in 1952. He left school at age 15, and held a variety of part-time jobs before deciding to ply his trade in music; as a drummer-cum-vocalist, he enjoyed limited success before a motorcycle accident cut short his ambitions.

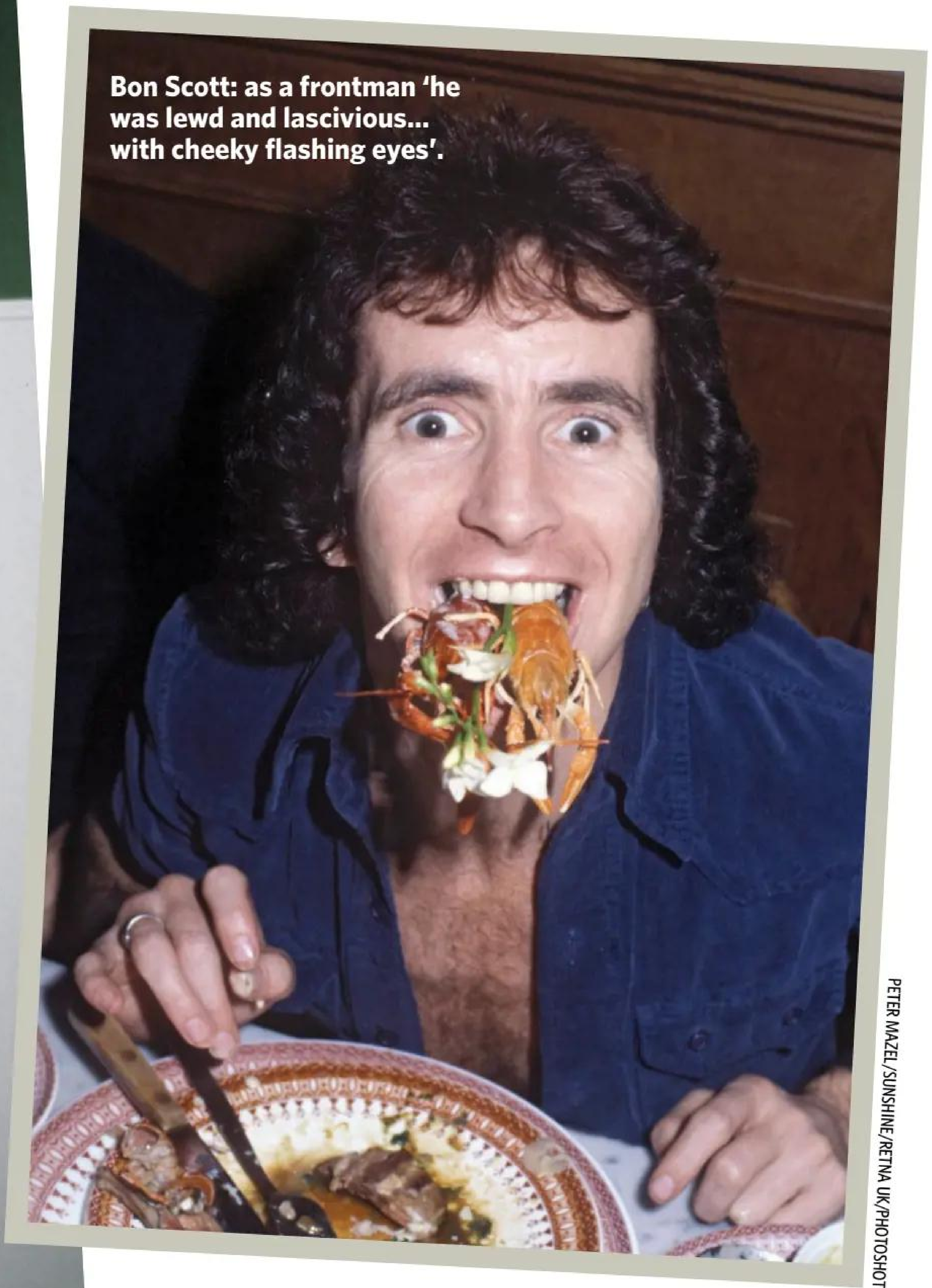
Once recovered, Bon took a job driving a stomping little outfit called AC/DC around: down the streets of Melbourne, across tumbleweed trails, along desert roads and beyond. But Bon always hankered to be a solid-gold-proper AC/DC band member, not a humble roadie.

▷

Ronald + Frank
from
Germany
Cheers
AC-Foxi-DC
No 67
FLATS 1-6
TO BON
SZMERY
FROM POLAND

PETER MAZEL/SUNSHINE/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Have a drink on me: ex-UFO guitarist Paul Chapman recalls Bon drinking aftershave.



Bon Scott: as a frontman 'he was lewd and lascivious… with cheeky flashing eyes'.

PETER MAZEL/SUNSHINE/RETNA UK/PHOTOSHOT

Tempering his bright-eyed braggadocio somewhat, he charmed his way into the group's affections and eventually achieved his aim, joining AC/DC as singer in late September 1974, replacing the glam rockin' Dave Evans. AC/DC's brand new frontman made an immediate impact. Bon Scott was TNT.

Bon was only in AC/DC for a little over five years; he died at age 33 on February 19, 1980. Nevertheless, this bare-chested, black-haired, garrulous'n'glowering, lewd'n'lascivious larrikin was justifiably named the greatest rock frontman of all time in *Classic Rock* No.68. 'Bon had a riveting presence,' we wrote. 'He was cocky but he wasn't conceited. He was vulgar but he wasn't boorish. He was tough as nails but with a soft white underbelly. He was a hero, an icon, but he was also the guy next door, lying underneath a greasy motorbike with a spanner in his hand.'

But don't just take our word for it. Even today Bon is fondly remembered by many of his peers. "I knew Bon for many, many years," Jimmy Barnes, former frontman with Oz rockers Cold Chisel, recently told *Classic Rock*. "He was a good mate of mine. When I was about 15 I used to go and see him in Fraternity [one of Bon's pre-AC/DC outfits], who were a great rock'n'roll band. Then he had that motorbike accident that took him off the scene for a while. And when he recovered he went off to join AC/DC. I then took his place in Fraternity – which was one of the sharpest learning curves of my life. I owe a lot to Bon.

"What a lot of people don't realise," Barnes adds, "is that he was an R&B singer. His favourite singer was Sam Moore [of Sam & Dave]; their tones were very similar. To me, Bon brought something to AC/DC that they've lacked since his death – that tongue-in-cheek humour. You could never tell whether he was laughing with you, or at you. The chemistry between him and the Young brothers [guitarists Angus and Malcolm] was as good as Keith Richards and Mick Jagger… anyone, y'know? They were as menacing and as funny as anything I ever saw. And I used to see it regularly in small clubs in Australia."

Angry Anderson, the aggressive, shaven-headed singer with Australia's legendary Rose Tattoo, endorses Barnes's comments: "Bon was a gypsy, a vagabond, a buccaneer, a bad boy and a rock'n'roll outlaw. He was truly a street poet, documenting in lyric and performance all that he thought, felt and cared about life. He was the only other singer I ever invited to sing with the Tatts – whenever he felt like it."

This writer first met Bon Scott in May 1976. *Sounds* music weekly had taken the unprecedented step of sponsoring a fully-fledged British tour by an obscure band called AC/DC. The down under-based group's UK schedule was a 19-dater that kicked off on June 11, '76 at Glasgow City Hall, and climaxed at London's Lyceum Ballroom (nowadays better known for housing the stage production of Disney's The Lion King) on July 7. It was very a bold move for Sounds to lend its support to such an unknown band.

"I remember being invited by Atlantic [then AC/DC's record label] to see a film – they weren't called videos then – of Angus and friends taken in Australia," remembers Alan Lewis, who was editor of *Sounds* at the time. "And I was so blown away that it seemed like a no-brainer – that term wasn't around then either! – to get behind them."

Before the so-called *Sounds*-AC/DC 'Lock Up Your Daughters Summer Tour' started, I was invited to a low-key club gig the band had arranged at the Retford Porterhouse, just outside Nottingham. Prior to that show, I had also been to see AC/DC at London's Marquee (in those days in Wardour Street). 'If your face doesn't break out into an epidemic of smiles during the opening bars of the band's set, you must be a manic depressive,' ran the enthusiastic report.

Returning home from Retford in the back of AC/DC's van, my abiding memory is of a booze-sodden Bon Scott falling asleep on the rickety seat alongside, cradling an empty brandy bottle lovingly in his arms.

By the time we got back to AC/DC's rented house in Barnes, west London, as dawn was breaking, Bon was rousing from his stupor; his cheeky flashing eyes were beginning to become alive and alert once more.

But less than four years later, sozzled out of his brain while on board an entirely different vehicle, Bon would fall asleep and never wake up again. Almost 25 years after Bon Scott's death, there are still many unexplained events that surround it.

The story that everyone knows is this: after spending Christmas 1979 in Australia, Bon was in London in the New Year, working up songs for the next AC/DC studio album, the follow-up to *Highway To Hell*. He

'BON'S BODY WAS CURLED AROUND THE CAR'S GEAR STICK, HIS NECK TWISTED, HIS DENTAL PLATE DISLODGED.'

* * *

was living in a flat in Ashley Court, Victoria, London, with his new Japanese girlfriend, Anna Baba. Also in the frame was Bon's former girlfriend, Australian Margaret 'Silver' Smith, a renowned heroin user and dealer who was a familiar figure in London's then thriving rock'n'roll scene.

Author Clinton Walker relates the following story in his biography Highway To Hell: The Life & Times Of AC/DC Legend Bon Scott: on Monday evening, February 18, 1980, Bon phoned Silver Smith to invite her along to see a band at Dingwalls in Camden, north London. Silver declined, but said she had a friend – Alistair (sometimes spelled Alasdair) Kinnear – who would be delighted to accompany him. In the end, Bon and Kinnear ended up at the Music Machine, a venue just down the road from Dingwalls at the bottom end of Camden High Street, near Mornington Crescent Tube station.

Two days later, following Bon's sudden death, Kinnear was quoted in the Wednesday, February 20 edition of London's *Evening Standard* newspaper: "I met up with Bon to go to the Music Machine, but he was pretty drunk when I picked him up. When we got there, he was drinking four whiskies straight in a glass at a time."

Events begin to get rather hazy from here on in. The oft-repeated version is that Kinnear drove Bon back to the singer's flat in Victoria, but a boozed-up Scott had passed out in the car in the meantime, and apparently could not be stirred. So Kinnear then made a diversion to East Dulwich, where he lived in a flat at number 67 Overhill Road. Kinnear parked his car – a tiny, French-built supermini – outside his home, but Bon remained unconscious. He simply couldn't be shifted.

"I just could not move him," Kinnear told London evening newspaper the Standard, "so I covered him with a blanket and left him a note to tell him how to get up to my flat in case he woke up."

Kinnear says he went to bed in the early hours of Tuesday, February 19, and that he didn't wake until the following evening. "I went to sleep and it was later in the evening [reportedly at 7.45pm] when I went back out to the car, and I knew something was wrong immediately."

Inside Kinnear's car, Bon Scott lay dead. 'He could not find a comfortable position in the small car,' Clinton Walker recounts in his book. 'His body was curled around the gearstick, his neck twisted, his dental plate dislodged. The bile rose up in his throat and blocked his asthmatic windpipe.'

Bon's body was taken to nearby King's College Hospital. The coroner concluded that the vocalist had died due to acute alcoholic poisoning. There was no mention of drugs being involved.

Kinnear – allegedly a would-be musician; apparently a bass player – disappeared a couple of days later, and his flat in East Dulwich was ransacked by persons unknown. Kinnear has never been heard of since.

Much has been made of the British heavy rock band UFO's role in the events leading up to Bon's death. Indeed some reports suggest that on the evening he died Bon had intended to meet up with the band's vocalist Phil Mogg and bassist Pete Way at the Music Machine in Camden. This writer even remembers AC/DC's manager at the time, Peter Mensch, going so far as to criticise UFO's party-hard lifestyle and bemoan the negative influence it had on Bon.

Classic Rock recently spoke extensively to Pete Way and ex-UFO guitarist Paul Chapman to get their take on Bon's death. Chapman, for one, has an intriguing tale to tell – and one that clashes with Scott biographer Walker's version of the tragic events. Indeed the UFO pair's memories differ substantially from many previously published reports. And while it should be remembered that both Way and Chapman were heroin users in the early 80s, and that their testimonies may be unreliable, their recollections – to *Classic Rock* at least – sound at least as credible as any others.

We should mention here that it's unlikely that Way and Chapman have spoken recently to correlate, or collaborate on, their stories. Way knew that we wanted talk to him about Bon Scott; Chapman didn't; we merely requested the latter's assistance on a 'project' we were working on.

The two fell out during the recording of *Back From The Dead*, the recently released comeback album from Pete Way's band Waysted. Chapman, who is based in the US, contributed guitar parts for the album and sent them over to England. But Way rejected them, claiming they weren't good enough. Unknown guitarist Chris George was brought in to play on Waysted's album instead of Chapman.

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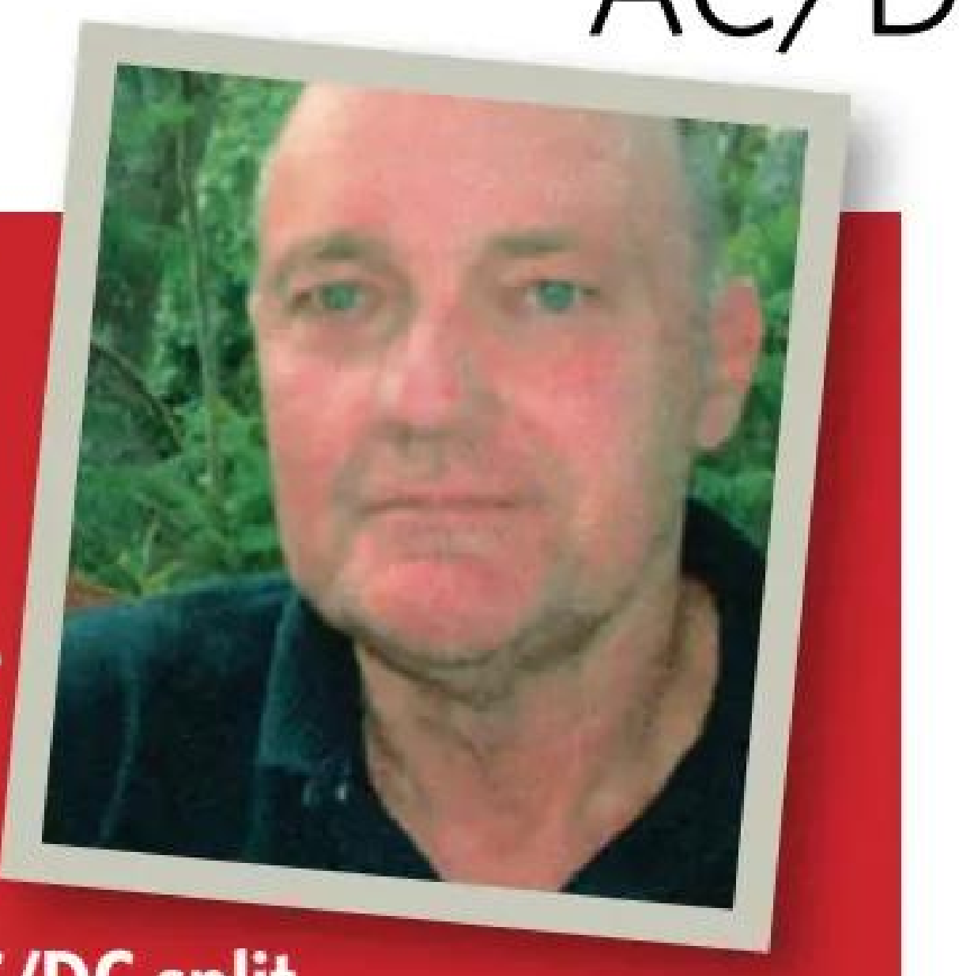
MICHAEL BROWNING

MANAGER OF AC/DC, 1974-79



Michael Browning took over as AC/DC's manager in November 1974. His introduction to the band was when they played the Hard Rock Café in Melbourne, which he was running at the time. AC/DC split with Browning acrimoniously in 1979, and signed to the Leber-Krebs organisation in the US, with Peter Mensch as their personal manager. Interview: Joe Matera

WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS WHEN YOU FIRST MET Bon?

I had known Bon for many years prior to him joining AC/DC, from when he was in a band called The Valentines. The Valentines were a satin-clad, bell-bottom-wearing teeny-bop band. Then he later joined Fraternity, which was the total opposite of The Valentines: an earthy, almost hippy kind of group. But when he joined AC/DC the real true character of Bon came out. I think a lot of people were surprised initially when he joined AC/DC, because it would have been the last place they would have expected to see Bon. But then again, in their early days AC/DC had very much a glam-rock vibe happening, so if Bon had gone from The Valentines into AC/DC it would have made more sense.

WHAT DID Bon BRING TO AC/DC?

He brought an enormous presence and character into the group. And I rate Bon as a lyricist up there with the greats, alongside Jim Morrison and the likes. Bon was a poet first and a vocalist second. And he was a very highly intelligent lyricist and poet. He really took the Aussie larrikin archetype to a whole different level. Within AC/DC it showed that there was a lot about his character that was really kept under wraps in his previous groups. So in joining AC/DC he was really able to really be himself.

DID YOU EVER PERCEIVE Bon TO BE A LOOSE CANNON?

Yes and no. But the one thing you can always say about Bon is that he never once let anybody down. He could go and get as fucked up as he liked, but he would always be where he had to be on a professional level. So you could say he lived on the edge but in a professional way [laughs].

WAS THERE ANYTHING EVER DONE TO KEEP HIM UNDER CONTROL?

No, as Bon was a pretty intelligent guy and he knew his limitations.

COULD YOU OR ANYBODY ELSE HAVE FORESEEN IN ANY WAY HIS UNTIMELY DEATH?

Well, Bon did always used to say that he was pretty sure he wouldn't live beyond 40. So I think in some ways everybody kind of expected it to happen eventually if he was left to his own devices.

CAN YOU SHARE SOME STORIES YOU REMEMBER ABOUT HIM?

There is one funny story that we used to laugh a lot about at the time, but the details are sketchy now. There was this time where Bon had two different girls in the maternity ward of the same hospital in Melbourne, and both women were totally unaware of each other. Another time, when the band played the Glasgow Apollo... he did his thing of where he used to go out into the audience. Anyway, this time he actually went outside the gig and ended up getting locked out. He had to talk his way back into the gig during a song! To me, that typified Bon.

Classic Rock met up with Way at Waysted singer Fin Muir's flat in Milton Keynes. We had arranged the meeting because we remembered the famous photograph, taken by Ross Halfin, of Way posing with Bon Scott backstage at a UFO gig at Hammersmith Odeon (now Apollo) in February 1980. This was the last photo taken of Bon before his death, and Way has vivid memories of it: "Yes, you're right, that was me with Bon. He was hanging out backstage; he was a mate."

Way told us about when he first encountered AC/DC: "It was when they played the Marquee. I went as a fan, cos I am a fan. I had heard *Livewire*, I think it was, and I thought: 'I love this'. I went down and became friendly with them."

Later, UFO and AC/DC spent several months touring in the US together. "They were supporting us. They were special guests; that's before they'd broken through," Way recollects. "There was us two and Foreigner. That was a good one. AC/DC hated Foreigner, because they'd do everything to make us not go down well!"

Way was mightily impressed by Bon Scott as a frontman: "He was fantastic," he gasps. "Do you know who Bon reminds me of? Alex Harvey. I'm a big fan of Alex Harvey – *Faith Healer* and that. It's the same thing; Bon had the same attitude. Sensational. Maybe in a movie you can create a Bon, but you can't create a Bon in real life. Bon created himself."

Way fondly remembers bon as "a really nice person. A very nice person. Had a drink, got drunk, went and played, sung better than anybody. [It was] the AC/DC attitude, and Bon was perfect for them. There was no: 'Oh, I think I'm going to see if I can do a harmony here', it was like: 'This is the way we are'. It hit you in the face like a truck, because it was something better than anything else. It was something so special – people with their own minds, [who had made] their own decisions about music, and had their own principles.

"AC/DC wrote the law about playing rock'n'roll. As simple as that. And Bon was brilliant. You'd see him first thing in the morning, and he'd been with the barmaid or something, and he'd go: 'Had a good workout last night'. He'd get out of the elevator, he'd clap his hands and he'd say: 'Large Jack Daniel's.' Brilliant."

Unprompted, Way brings up the subject of Bon Scott's death: "I'm still alive, Bon isn't. I'm not saying his lifestyle should be endorsed or recommended, but you have to say that certain people lived in a different world, or created a different world. You write movies about people like Bon Scott."

Scott was addicted to Mars Bars; his teeth were rotten.

DICK BARNATT/REDFERNS/GETTY

Bon's demise, Way says, affected him badly: "It hit me hard. And it's funny, it took his death to wake the world to AC/DC. It was like, something special. Punk rock almost made it, but AC/DC made it to the max. Bon launched AC/DC's career into stardom. You can't buy a Bon Scott. But you know, when we were on tour in the US with them, every night I watched Angus and Bon I thought, wow! It was like a hurricane. It was much better than UFO, and we had to go on and follow it."

We return to memories of that photograph of Way and Bon backstage at Hammersmith Odeon in February 1980. Way continues: "Now we as UFO were on substances, right? We were using heroin after the show. I've got to be very careful here. One of the guys that was bringing it to us was Australian, and he came down with Bon. And, you know, if you do cocaine and drink you can get a violent reaction. But if you've never done heroin before – and we were doing heroin after the show like we always did – and you drink, the odds are that at some point you'll fall asleep, and you'll choke and you'll die."

Rania Habal, MD, of the Society For Academic Emergency Medicine, places Way's comments into context: "Alcohol is a very common co-ingestant in heroin overdoses," he comments. "Additionally, a fatal heroin overdose is nearly always caused by respiratory arrest."

So, Way remembers Bon hanging out with a heroin dealer at that time. Would he go so far as to say that Scott was doing smack backstage with UFO? "I don't really know," Way shrugs, "but you generally know the symptoms. Cos we were doing smack and Bon was there… and he drank a lot. But, you know, a lot of people drink a lot, but they drink and throw up and live to tell the tale."

Who was the Australian guy who arrived with Bon? "Joe Silver or whoever it was." [Way is getting confused here: this name is an amalgam of Joe Bloe/Joe King and Silver Smith; see Paul Chapman interview later in this story.] "Well, he had different names. Lots of different names. Look, some people sell drugs; you can't make judgements against them… He was a nice guy. Like, if someone dies in a car crash because they've got drunk in a bar, you can't blame the barman. Just because somebody has cocaine or heroin or something like that and brings it down to your friends… You can't point a finger at anybody if they're living a life of excess. And unfortunately I think what probably happened… If you're not skilled at the art of heroin, then you do dance with the Devil…

"But what a beautiful guy, what a great songwriter Bon was… As I say, it was like Alex Harvey, some of Bon's stuff, the tongue-in-cheek thing. He was a real personality."

Classic Rock tries to pin Way down and to get him to offer his precise memories of Bon's death. As we do so, Paul Chapman's name is mentioned for the first time.

"I got a phone call," Way recounts. "Paul Chapman [then UFO's guitarist] called me. He said: 'Pete, Bon's just died. The people – the police or whoever – need to tell the band.' I've got Angus and Malcolm's home numbers. So I thought, don't let Angus know; Malcolm's the person to tell first. So I gave Paul Chapman Malcolm's number. I got on quite well with them, so I had the numbers of where they were in London. And I really didn't want to [give the number to Chapman], because it's quite early in the morning when I got the phone call."

Here's where the popularly accepted version of the Bon Scott story takes a major detour. To recap: Alistair Kinnear said he discovered Bon's body in his

Bon and Angus had an electrifying presence on stage in AC/DC.

JORGEN ANGEL/REDFERNS/GETTY

car at 7.45 in the evening on Tuesday, February 19. Pete Way says that he was informed about Bon's death on the Tuesday morning. So what happened? How did Paul Chapman know so early that Bon had died?

Way: "Well… [coughs] you know… [voice tapers off]. But, you know, some people do fall asleep and choke in the car. Paul will probably… I've got to be very careful here again. Paul's one of them people who can have as many drinks as you like, and he'll do as many drugs as you like. Remember, we used to call him Tonka. But yeah, he was actually the one who called me early in the morning to say: 'Can you get me one of the band's numbers, because Bon's dead'. So I probably knew before anybody. But I don't know the actual situation."

Way adds: "With Bon there were no limits, so really and truly you don't know, do you? It can happen to any of us. These days I'm older and perhaps wiser, because I'll have a few drinks or whatever, and one night I might do a bit of coke. But at least I'm older and wiser; sometimes you're young and you ain't that wise."

"The guys in the pub could relate to Bon," says ex-AC/DC bassist Mark Evans. "He was a hard-arse."

PETER MAZEL/SUNSHINE/RETNA/PHOTOSHOT

> **" AC/DC WERE LIKE A HURRICANE. IT WAS BETTER THAN UFO, AND WE HAD TO FOLLOW IT."**
>
> **PETE WAY, UFO**

A week after our conversation with Pete Way, *Classic Rock* tracked down former UFO guitarist Paul Chapman at his home in Florida. *Classic Rock* knows the Wales-born musician from way back, having first met him when he played guitar in 70s rockers Lone Star.

Chapman is still angry about having his guitar work deleted from Waysted's aforementioned new album, *Back From The Dead*. On his website he has even posted sound bites of his original work for the album, claiming it was rejected for no good reason. So, plainly, there is no love lost between Paul Chapman and Pete Way. Nevertheless, Chapman's recollections of Bon Scott's death follow on seamlessly from Way's. Chapman is convinced that he was one of the last people to have seen Bon alive. Bon's biographer, Clinton Walker, admitted he never interviewed Chapman for his book, explaining why the full account has never emerged until now: "I never spoke to Chapman," Walker says, "but in the interviews with him I've read he sheds no light, and I even doubt his claims of closeness. Therefore I was content to speak to the people who saw Bon on that very last day: his then girlfriend [Anna Baba], his old girlfriend [Silver Smith] and 'Alistair Kinnear'." (The quotes around 'Alistair Kinnear' are Walker's own.)

Be that as it may. *Classic Rock* asked Chapman straight out about his early-morning phone call to Pete Way and his request for the phone numbers of Angus and Malcolm Young so they could be informed of Bon's death. As we say, if the timing is accurate, then Chapman would have made his call several hours before Alistair Kinnear's 'discovery' of Bon's body in the Renault 5 outside the flat in East Dulwich in the evening of Tuesday, February 19, 1980.

"I'll tell you exactly what went down," Chapman responds eagerly. "We [UFO] were playing at Hammersmith. And Bon arrived; it was on the second or the third of our nights there. The guy who was with Bon that night was someone called Joe Bloe, an Australian guy. He changed his name by deed poll to Joe King, but his real name was Joe Bloe."

The actual dates of UFO's Hammersmith shows were February 3, 4, 5 and 7.

Chapman continues: "Joe used to work for me; he was my guitar tech for about six months. I remember how I met Joe. There was a flat in Hammersmith – it was Joe's place – and one of the guys there was a smack dealer. And I, er, used to go there. Joe was going out with someone called Silver Smith [Bon Scott's ex-girlfriend]. Silver Smith and Joe King – funny names, you know." (In Clinton Walker's Bon Scott book, there is also a character called 'Joe Furey' with UFO connections.)

"I remember when [names top British prog-rock musician] pulled up in a Rolls-Royce outside. The flat was on the second floor, and Joe King dangled the smack down – it was attached to a piece of rope, and he had a rock in the bag to weigh it down – and he dangled it through the sun roof of his Roller, and this guy just drove off."

Chapman returns to the subject at hand: "Anyway, Joe ended up working for me for quite a while, although he wasn't when the Bon thing happened. So some days after our Hammersmith gigs, just before Bon died, I met up again with Joe and Bon, and I said: 'Why don't you come back to my house?' I lived in Fulham, just off Wandsworth Bridge Road – I could look out the window and see the Young's brewery on one side and the Gordon's gin factory on the other. A perfect place to live. I said to Joe and Bon: 'Why don't you pay me a visit?' Joe said: 'We haven't got very much smack left'. And at that point Bon went off."

The above events presumably occurred during the afternoon or early evening of Monday, February 18.

Chapman adds: "He [Bon] was actually going to get some more smack for us. [But] Bon never showed up. Bon never came back to my flat. After a long time waiting, I can remember Joe saying: 'I have to get back home'. Joe and Bon had rented some place to live in Bayswater or Maida Vale, somewhere like that, I can't quite remember where." [Chapman probably means Bon's flat in Victoria.]

So, were Joe King and Bon Scott living together at this time?

"Yes," Chapman affirms. "Joe was, like, Bon's minder. He was looking after ▷

MARK EVANS
AC/DC BASS PLAYER '75-'77

Mark Evans joined AC/DC as bass player in March 1975 before his personality clashes with Angus Young led to his dismissal from the band in May 1977. Interview: Joe Matera.

WHAT IMPRESSIONS DID YOU HAVE OF BON WHEN YOU FIRST JOINED AC/DC?
My impression of him was already pretty well formed before I had met him. Though I knew of him from his Valentines days in the late 60s, it was with his tenure with Fraternity [that] my impression of him was that of a hippy version of Elvis Presley.

WHAT WAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH BON DURING YOUR STAY IN THE BAND?
It was always very, very good, and there were never any problems. Because he was older than all of us, like he was 28 and I was 18, he lived a life very separate from the rest of the band. and had his own sort of social scene away from the band. And though he had a very wide-ranging and energetic social life, he never let the band down in any way. He never, ever missed a gig.

WHAT DO YOU THINK WERE HIS ATTRIBUTES AS A FRONTMAN?
Just everything about his character, and that he was a very good rock'n'roll singer. There were plenty of good rock'n'roll singers around at the time but none could make the grade as Bon did. Chicks loved him because they thought he was a bit of a bad boy, and the guys loved him too. Especially the guys in the pubs we played in Melbourne, as they could relate to him because they thought he was a hard-arse. To them he was also just of the boys done good. He just related to both guys and girls.

DID YOU EVER THINK Bon WOULD BECOME THE ICON HE HAS BECOME AFTER HE DIED?
That's a hard question to answer because you don't really think in those terms. But in the fullness of time, I'm not really surprised he's held in the position that he's held. You really can't compare him to anybody; he was unique. The thing I really I think I'm more surprised about is the fact he hasn't really been recognised more for his lyrics. His lyrics were very wry, very funny and all very much tongue in cheek. If you go back and read them, they're really tremendous lyrics.

DID YOU EVER SENSE THAT BON'S LIFESTYLE WOULD CULMINATE IN HIS EARLY DEATH?
No, but I remember being with him a few times, where he sort of had a few drinks and passed out mainly due in part to him being heavily asthmatic. Though it was a shock when it did happen, certainly after the dust had settled, it was no surprise.

CAN YOU SHARE SOME STORIES ABOUT BON?
At one stage in the band's early days, Angus used to get dressed up as whole bunch of different characters that ranged from Super Angus to a Gorilla. Angus just wasn't just a schoolboy. Anyway one night we were down in Hobart and Angus had gone off stage to get into his gorilla suit and was then rolled out in a cage on stage. Suddenly Bon disappeared and we're all going: "Where the fuck did Bon go?" Then we heard this sort of Tarzan jungle cry and here is Bon coming out with this Tarzan lap-lap sort of thing on him. He had strung a rope up into the rafters, got on top of the PA and started swinging from it Tarzan style in front of the PA. It was so fuckin' funny. He would do these things like that all the time and he'd never tell us. Another time was when we performed *Baby Please Don't Go* live on *Countdown* (Australia's then answer to *Top Of The Pops*) and Bon had got dressed up as a schoolgirl. Again he didn't tell us. So here we were, being filmed live on television, and the music starts up and Bon's nowhere to be found, and we're all going: "Where the fuck is Bon?" As soon as his vocals are about to begin he comes out from behind the drums and hits the stage dressed as this schoolgirl. And it was like a bomb had gone off in the joint; it was pandemonium, everybody broke out in laughter. Bon had a wonderful sense of humour. He was the archetypal naughty boy.

CUT OUT: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

him. So, as I say, Bon went off to wherever he went, and he said to me: 'I'll see you back at your place with the stuff'. Bon had my phone number, and he had all the directions of how to get to my flat in Fulham."

Here's where the time-difference factor kicks in big-time. Kinnear's claimed 7.45pm discovery of Bon Scot's corpse – on Tuesday, February 19, remember – contrasts sharply with Chapman's recollection of learning about the singer's death in the morning of that day.

Chapman reiterates: "Anyway, by seven o'clock in the morning [of February 19], Joe and me are still in my flat in Fulham. The sun comes up, and I say: 'I have to go to bed'. I say to Joe: 'I'll call you a minicab if you want'. And Joe says: 'No, they can take a while to arrive, I'll make my own way home'. And off he went."

Chapman's ex-roadie was totally wasted when he stepped into the morning light. "I went downstairs and opened the front door," the guitarist says, "and this winter sunshine comes blasting in. Joe was green. He was the colour of my fish tank."

Upon Joe King's departure, Chapman went back upstairs: "I didn't have much furniture, there were cushions on the floor and I fell asleep on them. At 10 or 11 o'clock [in the morning] the phone goes. It's Joe. He goes: 'Are you sitting down?' I go: 'I'm lying down, where you left me.' He says: 'I've got bad news. Bon is dead.'"

The phone line went quiet: "then I heard Joe crying his eyes out. He was losing it. I knew that Pete [Way] had AC/DC's numbers; Joe didn't have the numbers of anyone else in the band. Joe was back at this place he shared with Bon in central London [Victoria]. That was where he was phoning from. He was waiting for Bon to come home, because obviously Bon didn't come back to my house in Fulham.

"They'd just rented the place [in Victoria], and I can remember Joe saying: 'We've got a video and a telly and everything'. So I called Pete Way and he gave me AC/DC's numbers, and then I called Joe back at his and Bon's place. This was in central London, as I say; it definitely wasn't in East Dulwich [the location of Alistair Kinnear's flat]. I spoke to Pete, I phoned Joe and I gave him AC/DC's numbers."

So, after that, Joe King must have called the guys in the band. Chapman: "Yes. Or he told [manager] Peter Mensch. But I can remember Bon's old girlfriend, Silver, calling me up and saying: 'He's a cunt, that Peter Mensch'.

"The first thing that happened [after Bon's death] was the TV and the VCR went missing from Bon and Joe's house. People cleaned out the place. I said to Pete Way: 'Fuck, one minute Bon's here, the next he's gone, and then his telly's gone and whatever else he might have rented is gone'. It was like he got erased."

So, to *Classic Rock*'s $64,000 question: obviously UFO were going through a major heroin period 25 years ago; it sounds as if dealers were here, there and everywhere. But when Bon's death certificate was issued, it said the cause of death was 'acute alcoholic poisoning'. "Yeah," Chapman agrees. "And hypothermia." (In fact, there was no mention of hypothermia.) The death certificate, we repeat, said drugs weren't in Bon's system.

Chapman: "I don't think they were. I believe the reason Bon went to East Dulwich was he was going to get some smack. Maybe he couldn't score at the Music Machine. I don't know if it [the smack] was for us, or for us and him as well. I can never recall him being into that. He was just a hard drinker."

But Bon also had a craving for sugar: "His teeth were rotten," says Chapman. "He was always eating Mars Bars; AC/DC used to have Mars Bars on their tour rider. I've also seen Bon drink aftershave. Absolute truth. But I can never recall seeing him put anything in his mouth or up his nose; pills or smoking, nothing like that. But he drank like a wildman."

Classic Rock urges Chapman to reiterate his comments, just to make sure there's no doubt about what he's saying. We ask: so regardless of the fact that Bon had all these people who were into smack around him, you say that he would've abstained from indulging?

"I… er… yeah. I can say that I never, ever remember seeing Bon take drugs. I might be wrong. Maybe I just wasn't there at the time when he did. Or if he did. That whole thing was just a total, fucking baffling mess, it really was.

"How the fuck Bon got to Dulwich, I don't know. I can't believe they left him in the car. It was February; it was freezing cold. I had Calor Gas heaters in my flat and they were fucking cranking just to keep the place warm. And after all this went down I called Pete Way back and I said: 'Can you believe they left Bon outside in the car?' And Pete said: 'Who the fuck would leave him in a car?'"

On the subject of heroin, Clinton Walker's book adds: 'If there's ever been a suspicion Bon was more deeply involved in narcotics than it seemed, the fact is that he never really got into heroin. Certainly, though, he dabbled in it. On at least one occasion, in Melbourne in early

1975, he almost died of an overdose. But that, it seems, was enough to warn him off it, even though heroin would surround him… for the rest of his life.'

So, we asked Chapman, do you know who this Alistair Kinnear guy was?

"The name rings a bell" he replied. "Maybe it rings a bell from the reports. I never met him."

How does Chapman think Joe King – who left Chapman's flat in a drugged-out daze on the morning of Tuesday, February 19 – found out about Bon's death so quickly, and ostensibly before Kinnear?

Chapman: "I don't know. I have no clue. He [Joe] was a basket case on the phone. I'd just woken up. I think maybe the people that Bon went [to East Dulwich] with, whoever they were, maybe they might've had a phone number of where Bon was staying with Joe [in Victoria]. So they must've called Joe, and then Joe called me.

"Bon was found dead at five o'clock in the morning or something like that. Joe left my flat at seven and he called me at 10 or 11. He found out some time between those times. But I've no idea how."

Bon Scott was 'a buccaneer, a bad boy and a rock'n'roll outlaw,' remembers Angry Anderson of Rose Tattoo.

FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY

Classic Rock's final words to Chapman are: so you're saying that Bon would happily buy drugs for people, and then give them out.

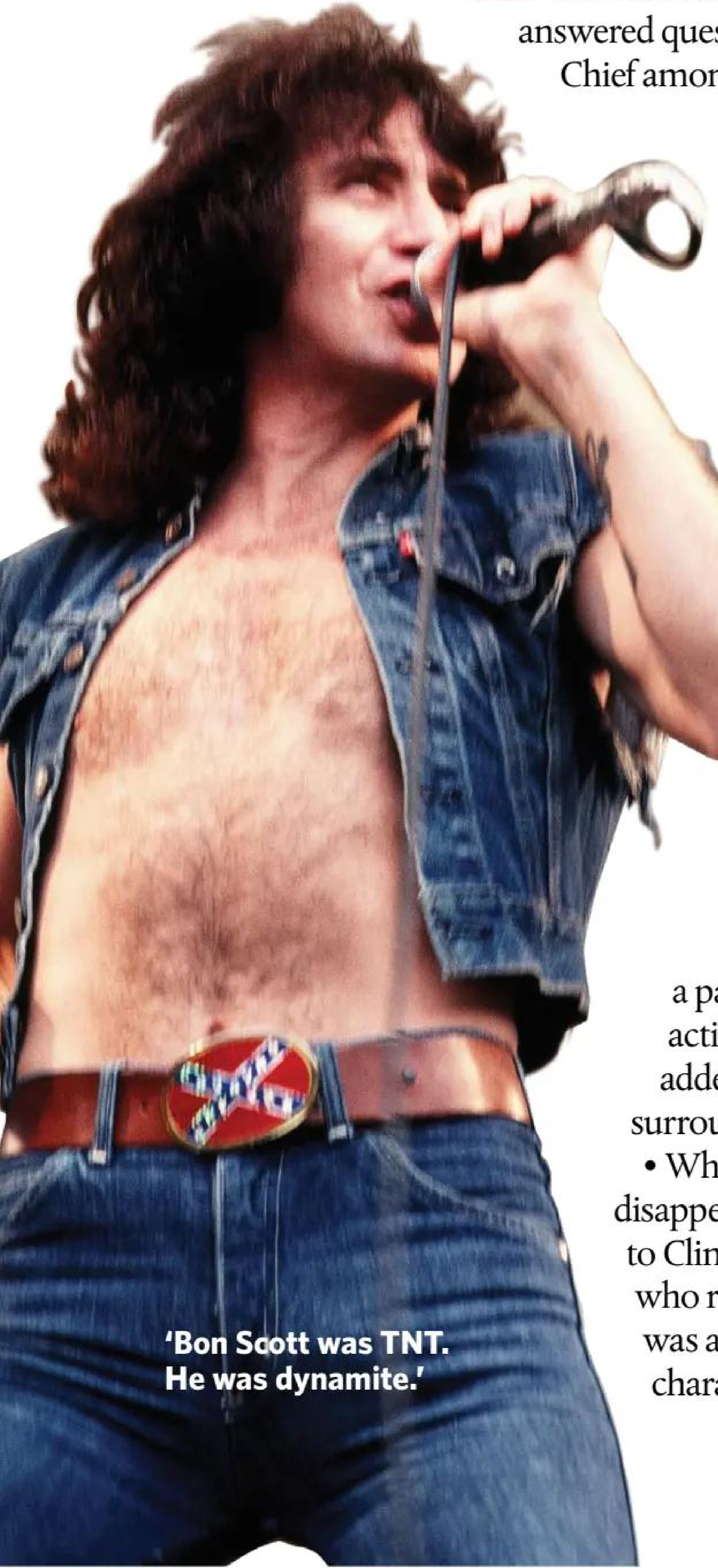
"He wanted to stay up and party," Chapman insists. "If that's what kept us up, then he'd be up for it. Bon just wanted to keep the party going."

Nothing is ever straightforward when a rock star dies. There's always no end of conjecture and confusion. And many glaring anomalies and answered questions about Bon Scott's death remain.

Chief among them are:

- When was Bon's body actually discovered? When did the police first find out? *Classic Rock* spoke to East Dulwich police station in Lordship Lane, who referred us to the Metropolitan Police press bureau. We were told that no information was available because Scott's was a 'non-suspicious death'. We then spoke to Southwark Coroner's Court and asked if we could gain access to their records. We were told to submit a request in writing, which we did promptly. It was subsequently rejected.

  A spokesman told us: "Unfortunately you are not what we would call 'a properly interested person'. That would be a parent, a spouse, a child or someone acting on behalf of the deceased." He added: "There is still sensitivity surrounding this case."
- Who is Alistair Kinnear, and why did he disappear from sight? We posed this question to Clinton Walker, Bon Scott's biographer, who replied cryptically: "Alistair, I believe, was another guise used by one of the characters already in my book – and I did try to very gently imply that. I have met this fellow, but I've left it at that. What I'm saying is, I met the guy who might have been 'Kinnear', but that feeling is based on no real evidence, just a hunch." Walker was unable to track down the 'real' Kinnear for his book.
- Alistair Kinnear – who some claim was a rock journalist, not a musician – may have changed his identity. The late writer Mark Putterford, who raised the issue of heroin being involved in Scott's death, was reputedly aware of Kinnear's new guise. A source told *Classic Rock* that, at the time of Putterford's death 10 years ago, Putterford was planning to approach Kinnear with regard to doing an updated version of *Shock To The System* (Putterford's AC/DC book that explores the heroin angle). One of the things that Putterford was planning to ask Kinnear was that if he was sober enough to drive across London, how come he was so inebriated that he slept solidly until the evening of Tuesday, February 19?



'Bon Scott was TNT. He was dynamite.'

After Bon's death, AC/DC closed ranks. Angus and Malcolm Young don't often speak about their old singer, who was replaced by Brian Johnson for 1980's *Back In Black* album. On the occasions when they do, their reminiscences are often anecdotal and humorous rather than heartfelt and emotional. That's no criticism, it may be the best way they can find to deal with their grief.

Australian singer Jimmy Barnes, of Cold Chisel fame, recently told *Classic Rock*: "Nobody was more hurt than the AC/DC boys at the time, because they lost a great friend and a fine singer. A lesser band would have collapsed, but they came back and went on to make so many more huge records. Bon was an awful hard man to replace."

Bruce Elder of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (formerly the London correspondent for *Rolling Stone*) spoke to Angus Young a few days after Bon's death.

Elder asked: "Who in the band was closest to Bon?" Angus replied: "We all were. You see, we were on the road for 10 or 11 months every year, and the rest of the time we were in the studio recording the next album. We were all close to Bon."

Elder concluded in his article: 'It was one of those moments when you suddenly realise the line between truth and myth in the rock'n'roll lifestyle. These guys were bonded by hard work and the desire to succeed.'

This tortured tale will continue to run and run, as it has done for the past 25 years. So let's bring things to a temporary conclusion with a few words from Bon Scott, who once summed himself up with the classic quote: "They say to me: 'Are you AC, or DC?' And I say: 'Neither, I'm the lightning!'"

And like a flash he was gone.

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Plus: If You Want Blood – the "magic" gig behind the album

The Mysterious Life And Disappearance Of Alistair Kinnear

Alistair Kinnear: he hadn't really disappeared. But then he did. Since we published the story of Bon Scott's death in February 2005, more details about Alistair Kinnear and Bon's last night have come to light. Words: **Scott Rowley**

Back in 2005, we reported how Bon Scott biographer Clinton Walker had concluded that the name Alistair Kinnear was most likely an alias and no such person ever really existed. Bon was surrounded by people with odd names and aliases – Joe King, Silver Smith, Anna Baba – but Kinnear was a real person who had been around the music business for years. In 1996, Nina Antonia's book on the Only Ones' Peter Perrett (*The One & Only*) had revealed that the original guitarist in Peter Perrett's early band England's Glory had been a former lighting guy at the Roundhouse called Alistair Kinnear. Fellow band member John Newey remembered: "He was a bit of an acid casualty and pretty spaced out most of the time."

On the night of Bon's death, the person who got them both on the guest list at the Music Machine in Camden, London was Zena Kakoulli, Peter Perrett's wife, and the band, by all accounts, were Lonesome No More, fronted by Zena's sister Koula Kakoulli. (The Cult's Billy Duffy joined Lonesome No More in 1980.)

The year the feature was published, Kinnear surfaced. Joel McIver, now the Editor of *Bass Guitar Magazine*, was working for *Record Collector* in 2004. "The woman who compiled crosswords for *Record Collector*, Maggie Montalbano, lived in Spain and mentioned that she was friends with Kinnear and asked if we would like to do an interview with him, via her, by email," he remembers. The interview, which came in the form of a statement, was later published verbatim in a *Metal Hammer/Classic Rock* AC/DC special in 2005. This is what Kinnear had to say:

"In late 1978 I met Silver Smith, with whom I moved to a flat in Kensington. She was a sometime girlfriend of Bon Scott. Bon came to stay with us for two weeks, and he and I became friends. Silver returned to Australia for a year, and I moved to Overhill Road in East Dulwich. On the night of 18 February 1980, Zena Kakoulli, manager of the Only Ones, and wife of bandleader Peter Perrett, invited me to the inaugural gig of her sister's band at the Music Machine in Camden Town (renamed Camden Palace in 1982). I phoned Silver, who was once again living in London, to see if she wanted to come along, but she'd made other arrangements for the evening. However, she suggested that Bon might be interested, as he had phoned her earlier looking for something to do. I gave him a call, and he was agreeable, and I picked him up at his flat on Ashley Court in Westminster.

"It was a great party, and Bon and I both drank far too much, both at the free bar backstage and at the upstairs bar as well; however, I did not see him take any drugs that evening. At the end of the party I offered to drive him home. As we approached his flat, I realised that Bon had drifted into unconsciousness. I left him in my car and rang his doorbell, but his current live-in girlfriend didn't answer. I took Bon's keys and let myself into the flat, but no one was at home. I was unable to wake Bon, so I rang Silver for advice. She said that he passed out quite frequently and that it was best just to leave him be to sleep it off.

"We should all take better care of our friends, and err on the side of caution when we don't know all the facts."

Alistair Kinnear

"I then drove to my flat on Overhill Road and tried to lift him out of the car, but he was too heavy for me to carry in my intoxicated state, so I put the front passenger seat back so that he could lie flat, covered him with a blanket, left a note with my address and phone number on it, and staggered upstairs to bed. It must have been four or five a.m. by that time, and I slept until about eleven, when I was awakened by a friend, Leslie Loads. I was so hungover that I asked Leslie to do me the favour of checking on Bon. He did so, and returned to tell me that my car was empty, so I went back to sleep, assuming that Bon had awoken and taken a taxi home. At about 7.30 that evening I went down to my car intending to pay a visit to my girlfriend who was in hospital, and was shocked to find Bon still lying flat in the front seat, obviously in a very bad way, and not breathing. I immediately drove him to King's College Hospital, where Bon was pronounced dead on arrival. The Lambeth coroner's report cited acute alcohol poisoning and death by misadventure.

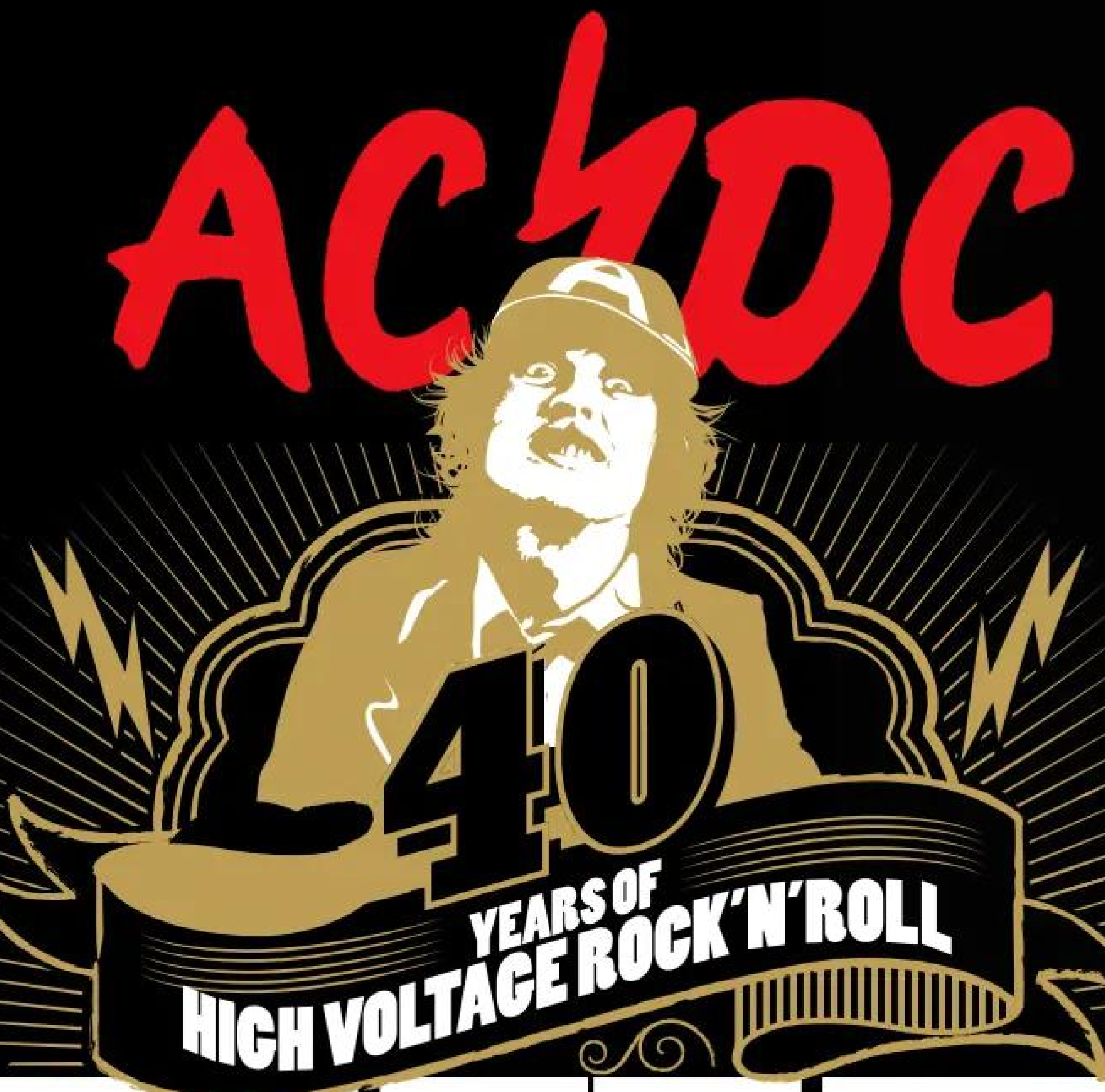
"It has since been speculated that Bon choked on his own vomit, but I can neither confirm nor deny this, and his death certificate says nothing about it. There was no vomit in the car, and contrary to other reports I've read, he was not wrapped around the gear stick when I found him. I made a statement to the police at the hospital and later spoke to the *Evening Standard*, relating everything I knew at the time.

"The next day, Silver came around to see me. She told me for the first time that Bon had been receiving treatment for liver damage, but had missed several doctor's appointments. I wish that I had known this at the time. I truly regret Bon's death. Hindsight being 20/20, I would've driven him to the hospital when he first passed out, but in those days of excess, unconsciousness was commonplace and seemed no cause for real alarm.

"It has been implied that I mysteriously 'disappeared', but in fact I have been living on the Costa del Sol for twenty-two years, still working as a musician, and am in touch with most of my old friends in England and in other parts of the world, so I am not hiding from anyone. What I'd like to pass on from this unfortunate experience is the idea that we should all take better care of our friends, and err on the side of caution when we don't know all the facts."

Ironically, Kinnear really did disappear. mysteriously In June 2006, he set sail on a 13-metre wooden-hulled boat from Marseille, France, with two other men, heading to Estepona in Spain. It never arrived at its destination. Neither a wreck of the boat nor the men's bodies were found. Maggie Montalbano later wrote to McIver to explain how she had hounded the authorities to investigate, and one morning "I got a phone call from a man who purported to be from the British Embassy in Malaga who said that they had found Alistair alive and well, but he didn't want anyone to know his whereabouts." Half asleep, she never got a contact name or number and admitted that, if that was true, it was odd that Kinnear hadn't sold his flat before taking on this new life.

"In fact," she said, "I am the only person who believes Ali[stair] may still be alive." Maggie Montalbano died from cancer in 2009.



THE 80s

A coffin on a runway... Noddy Holder... Roxy Music's drummer... Prince Charles and Diana Spencer... I have burn marks on my shoulders... AC/DC reborn...

1980 **EXIT BON, ENTER BEANO**

"BON'S MUM WAS DISTRAUGHT. BUT SHE WAS GRATEFUL FOR EVERYBODY COMING."

After finally making their international breakthrough, the new decade started in the worst possible way for AC/DC – with the death of their talismanic singer.

Words: **Mick Wall**

Bon Scott's death in London on February 19, 1980 was a bombshell for his bandmates in AC/DC. The singer was more than just their frontman – he was a mix of wayward elder brother, hellraiser-in-chief and, very occasionally, voice of reason.

Before the band could consider their future, there was the matter of getting his body back home. Angus Young was adamant that they wouldn't fly on the same plane as the coffin. "We're not having him sitting beneath us while we're up there," he told tour manager Ian Jeffery.

"I said, 'Don't worry. I'll take care of that,'" recalls Jeffery. "So I'd got everything arranged. Atlantic flew us all back first class, the band, me, [manager] Peter Mensch… It was perfect. We're just getting ready to get off the plane and I look out the window and I see a coffin going down…"

There had been a mix up when the original flight the coffin was booked onto had been cancelled, and the ground crew had arranged for it to be reloaded onto what turned out to be the same flight as the band.

"I could see this coffin on the runway, so I sat Angus down and said, 'I'll get your bag, don't worry about it,'" says Jeffery. "Once I'd seen them take that thing off and take it away, I let Angus stand up. Thankfully, it was dark, so there were lights on the [conveyor] belt coming out the plane."

They checked into a hotel in Perth, close to Fremantle. It was too late at night to go to Bon's parents' place. But first thing in the morning they all went over to pay their respects and give their condolences to Bon's parents, Isa and Chick.

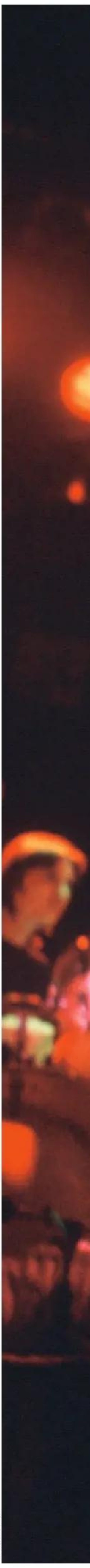
"By this time his poor parents had just been lambasted by the press – 'Rock Star Overdoses!'" says Jeffery. "His mum came out and she was totally what you'd think: so distraught. But she was so grateful for everybody coming. We went in there and typical thing, you know, sandwiches and cakes and a cup of tea. And she exploded when she got in there. Everything of grief you could ever imagine, as much as you could see of somebody who was totally distraught. She'd set out five chairs for the band – and four had come in to sit down. She realised then that her son was dead and that we'd come here to tell her. Cos she'd just been hiding for two days. It was a simple thing of laying five chairs out and when she came to the fifth chair it just gushed out like it was a waterfall. Everything you could imagine. I was fucking distraught. I was so, so sorry for that woman…"

The cremation itself took place in Fremantle, Western Australia, on Friday February 29, where the following day Bon's ashes were buried in the Memorial Gardens, in the shade of the flowering Eucalyptus. It was a small, no-frills service – just the band and their entourage, plus Fifa Riccobono from Albert's to join the forlorn gathering of friends and family. No photographers, no TV or radio crews. It wasn't even covered by the local media.

"There were a lot of kids outside," recalled Angus. '[But] it was better being quiet, because it could have been very bad if a lot of people had just converged there."

The day after the funeral, Phil Rudd flew home to Melbourne for a break; Cliff went with him. The brothers flew back to London with Ian Jeffery and Peter Mensch. It was now that Mensch tried passing a list of possible replacements to Malcolm, only for the guitarist to wave him away. ➐

"I COULD SEE THIS COFFIN ON THE RUNWAY, SO I SAT ANGUS DOWN AND SAID, 'I'LL GET YOUR BAG, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT.'" **IAN JEFFERY**



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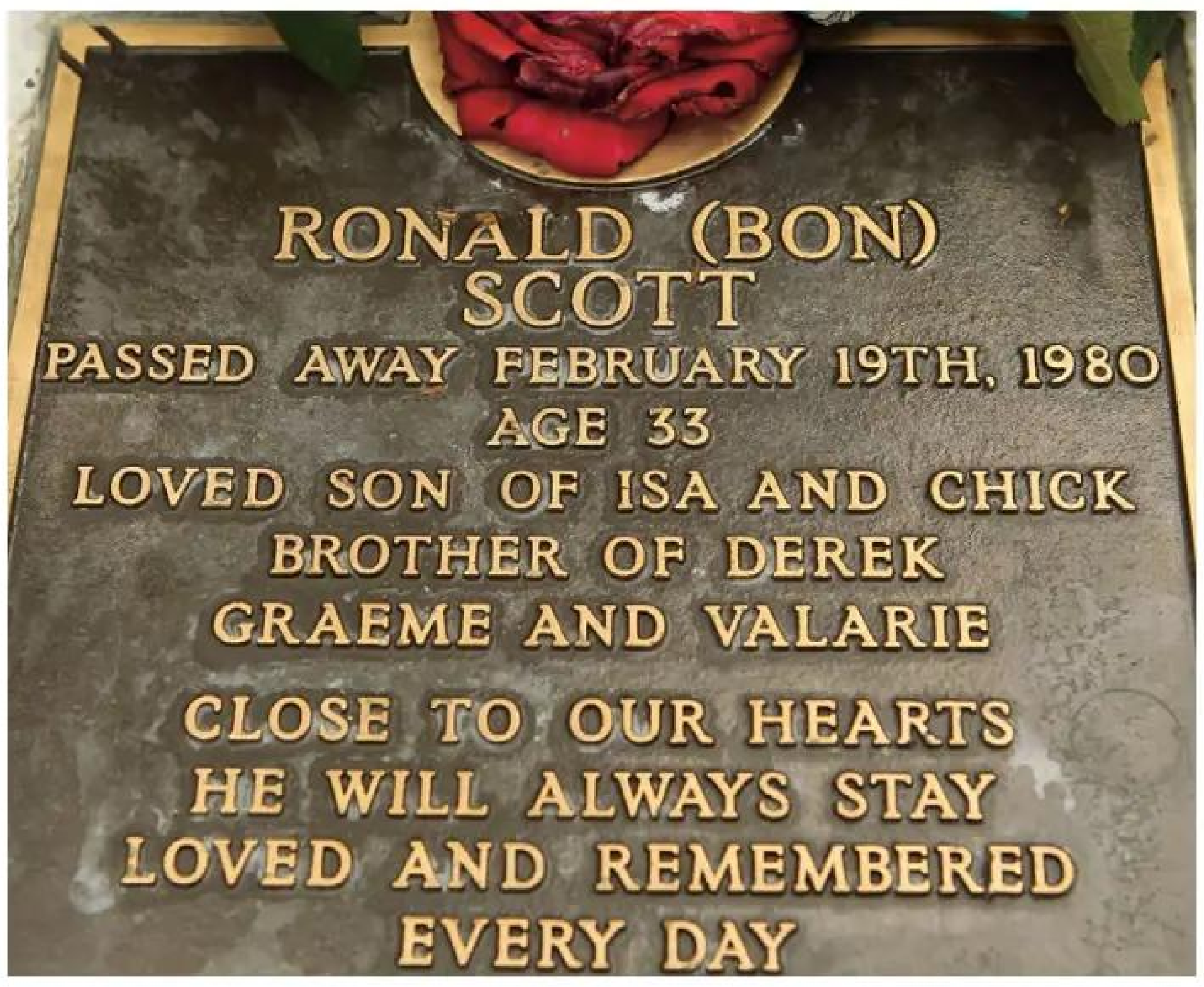


RONALD (BON)
SCOTT
PASSED AWAY FEBRUARY 19TH, 1980
AGE 33
LOVED SON OF ISA AND CHICK
BROTHER OF DEREK
GRAEME AND VALARIE

CLOSE TO OUR HEARTS
HE WILL ALWAYS STAY
LOVED AND REMEMBERED
EVERY DAY

"BRIAN JOHNSON IS A FAT C**T."

In March 1980, AC/DC began searching for a replacement for Bon Scott. These were the runners and riders.

STEVIE WRIGHT
Former singer with George Young and Harry Vanda's old band, The Easybeats. Resembled Scott in stature and voice, and was 18 years younger than the late AC/DC man. Unfortunately, he was battling a lifelong smack addiction.

JIMMY BARNES
The 24-year-old singer with Cold Chisel. Also had the voice and the looks, and was another ex-pat Scot. But the fact he was an established singer counted against him – Malcolm wanted someone with no baggage. Later denied he'd been approached, calling the story an "urban myth".

ANGRY ANDERSON
Burly Rose Tattoo frontman (above), who could have easily stepped into Bon's shoes. As could fellow Aussies Jimmy Swann and Fat Lip's Allan Fryer, the latter a Bon Scott Mini-Me who went on to form AC/DC soundalikes Heaven with Mark Evans. "All those guys in Australia, they were never in the equation," says tour manager Ian Jeffery. "They were never going back there for a singer."

GARY HOLTON
Former singer with the Heavy Metal Kids, had toured with AC/DC. Had the barrow boy front and scallywag charisma, but lacked the vocal range. Auditioned for the band in Pimlico, South London but Mutt Lange, who was helping the band sift through potential singers, didn't see it working.

GARY PICKFORD-HOPKINS
Ex-singer in blues-rock also-rans Wild Turkey, and an associate of Ian Jeffery from his days of singing for Rick Wakeman, Pickford-Hopkins had the right voice but none of the charisma. Still, he made the 'want-back' list, before being beaten to the punch.

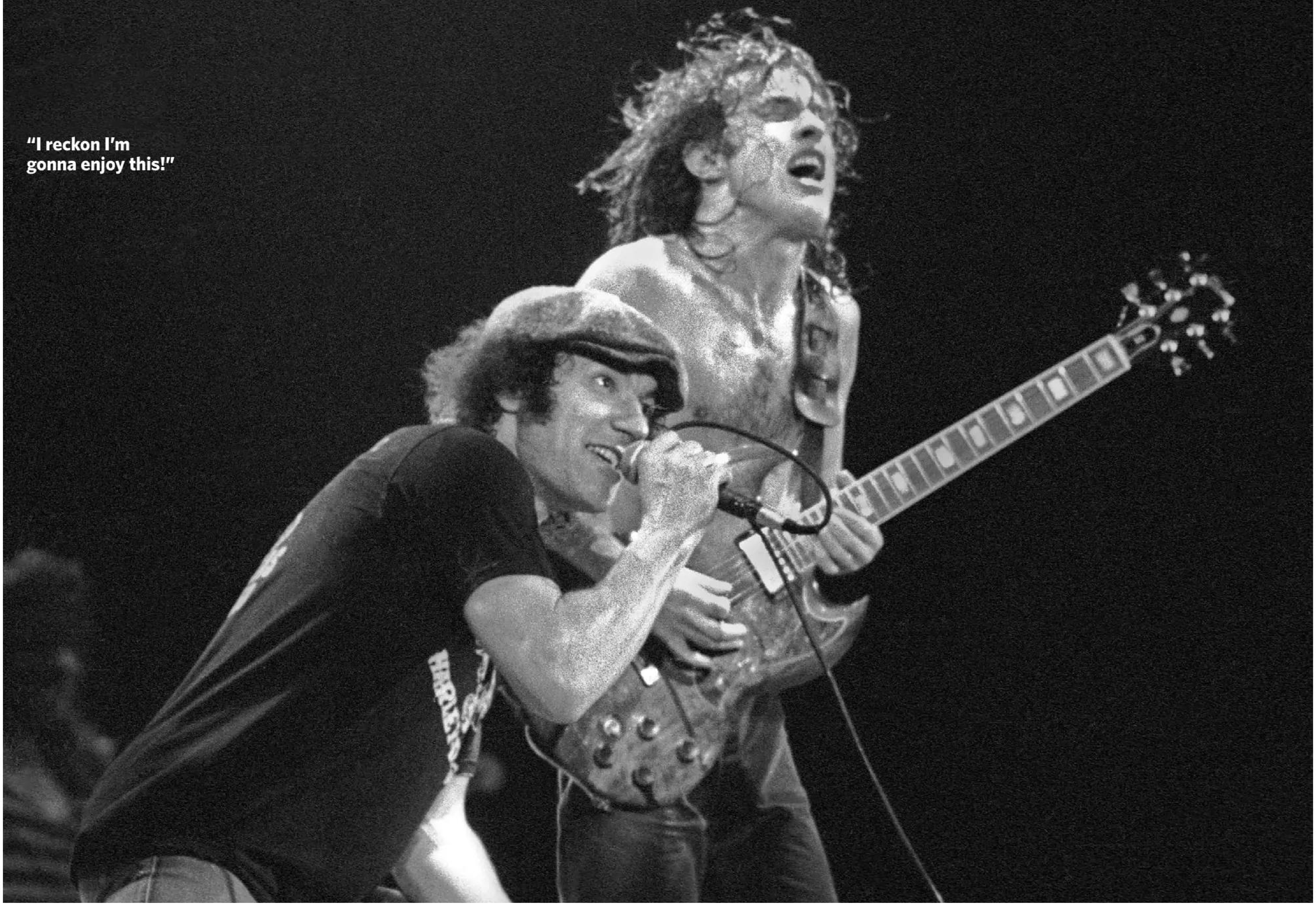
STEVE PARSONS
AKA Snips, formerly of Baker Gurvitz Army and, before that, Andy Fraser's much-heralded but unsuccessful post-Free outfit, Sharks. A favourite of engineer Tony Platt. "The guy had an extraordinary voice," says Platt.

TERRY SLESSER
Another fugitive from a band AC/DC had once toured with, Back Street Crawler, and arguably the man with the strongest chance of landing the gig. Slesser ran through *Whole Lotta Rosie*, *Highway To Hell* and *The Jack*, but shot himself in the foot when he refused to sing them again after Malcolm realised he hadn't turned the tape on. "He kind of let himself down," says Ian Jeffery.

NODDY HOLDER
Frontman with British glam-rock titans Slade. With the latter's career having hit the skids, AC/DC considered approaching Holder. "But they didn't think they'd get him," says Ian Jeffery. "And Malcolm said: 'People will just say, That's the singer in Slade. We can't have him, even though he would be fucking brilliant.'"

BRIAN JOHNSON
The singer with lower-league Newcastle glam-rockers Geordie, who notched up a lone Top 10 hit in 1972. Bon Scott had raved about his voice after his former band Fraternity supported Geordie on a UK tour in the early 70s, and Johnson had been an early auditionee, but Ian Jeffery was less convinced: "He's a fucking big fat cunt," the tour manager recalls telling Mutt Lange. "How we gonna have a big fat cunt singing with us?"

Out of exasperation more than hope, Malcolm insisted that they track down Johnson, who was working for his brother's roofing company at the time. Within a week, he was AC/DC's new singer.



"I reckon I'm gonna enjoy this!"

CLAYTON CALL/REDFERNS/GETTY

"WHAT? DO I WANNA JOIN AC/DC?"

One minute, washed-up former rock star **Brian Johnson** was running his car-repair business on Tyneside, the next he was in the Bahamas with Angus and co. recording what would become the biggest-selling rock album ever: *Back In Black*. Words: **Paul Elliott**

It was in March 1980 that Brian Johnson got the phone call that would change his life. A new decade had just begun, but Johnson had little cause for optimism. At 32 he was feeling washed up. Recently separated from his wife, Johnson was living at his parents' house in Gateshead, running a small car-repair enterprise and struggling to get by. His days as a rock'n'roll star had long-since passed.

In the early 70s Johnson had lived the dream. As the singer with glam-rock band Geordie he was Newcastle's answer to Noddy Holder, a working-class hero with a Jack The Lad charm and a voice like the foghorn on the Tyne ferry. Geordie had enjoyed a decent run: they were signed to EMI and had a Top 10 UK hit in 1973 with the foot-stomping anthem *All Because Of You*. But, unlike Holder and Slade, Geordie were never really cut out for the big league. The hits dried up, the band lost their record deal and, after some lean years playing working men's clubs in the North East, they split up.

"When I left Geordie," Johnson recalls, "I was completely broke. I had nothing. And I had two kids and a mortgage to pay. I was driving a VW Beetle that was 14 years old. I was fuckin' skint."

In the late 70s Johnson had scraped together just enough cash to start up his own business, fixing windshields and fitting vinyl roofs on fancy sports cars. It just about paid the bills, and was partly a labour of love: Johnson had been "nuts about cars" since he was a kid. He was also making a little money on the side – just beer money – with a new version of the old band, christened Geordie II. Only this time there were no delusions of grandeur.

"It was a cracking little band," Johnson says, "but we were never gonna make it as a recording act."

Brian Johnson was no fool. He knew there were few second chances in rock'n'roll, and so he treated Geordie II as merely "a bit of fun". The band's live show had a touch of cabaret about it – "We did a lot of comedy in there, cos the boys were very funny" – but they could rock too. And there was one song that was always guaranteed to get their audiences jumping – a song by an Australian rock band called AC/DC that was making a big noise in the late 70s.

"I didn't know too much about AC/DC," Johnson admits. "They were this cult band. But everybody was talking about them – I mean *everybody*. We used to play *Whole Lotta Rosie*. And we'd always save it for last, cos the place would go crazy!"

Brian loved singing that song. He still loved being up on a stage. But he wasn't kidding himself. "I was old. Shit, I was 32; I'd passed my sell-by date."

Then came the phone call that would change everything. A woman with a German accent told Brian that a band was auditioning for a new singer, that he had been recommended, and that auditions were being held in London. Brian asked for the name of the band. He wasn't going to travel all the way to London without knowing who he was auditioning for. When she said she wasn't

Still scared shitless: Beano on stage in New York, October 1980.

“I didn’t know too much about AC/DC. They were this cult band.”

– Brian Johnson

THIS PAGE: ROSS HAFLIN

permitted to tell him, he suggested she gave him the initials of the band's name. There was a pause.

"Okay… it's A, C and D, C."

Until the morning of February 20, 1980 AC/DC had seemed unstoppable. In the seven years since the band were formed in Melbourne, they had built a huge following throughout the world. Led by guitar-playing brothers Malcolm and Angus Young, and fronted by boozy, charismatic singer Bon Scott, they were widely acknowledged as the most electrifying rock'n'roll band on the planet.

At the turn of the 80s, AC/DC were on a roll. Their album *Highway To Hell* was certified gold in the US with sales of half-a-million copies, and in the first week of February the single *Touch Too Much* became their first UK Top 30 hit.

Then on February 20, after a night out with friends in Camden, north London, Bon Scott was found dead, later declared "death by misadventure" by coroners. He was just 33. Bon's death devastated his bandmates. Angus reflected: "When you're young you always feel immortal. But after Bon died I felt horribly grown up."

It was at Bon's funeral (on February 29, in Fremantle, the suburb of Perth where he had grown up) that the surviving members of AC/DC decided their future. Bon's father Chick took Malcolm Young to one side to offer some words of encouragement and to give his blessing for the band to carry on without his son. It gave them the lift they needed. "Bon would have done the same," Angus said. "We felt we had his blessing too."

After the funeral, Angus, Malcolm, bassist Cliff Williams and drummer Phil Rudd flew back to London, where they lived apart in small rented flats. For a couple of weeks they remained in mourning. "We were still real low," Malcolm said. "We weren't snapping out of it." Then, at Malcolm's insistence, he and Angus began writing again. "It was the two of us," Malcolm recalled. "Pick up the guitars, just for therapy. Maybe that's the way to get through this." At the very least, they wanted to finish what they had started with Bon.

A couple of new songs had been written just before Bon's death. One was based on a stop-start riff that Malcolm had written during a soundcheck on the last tour. The other was recorded as a rough take with Bon on drums; Bon hadn't finished any lyrics. But as soon as the new songs started coming together, in mid-March, Malcolm and Angus felt it was time to find a new singer.

It wasn't going to be easy – for the band or for the singers who would be trying out. Bon was a one-off, a huge personality and the epitome of rock'n'roll cool. To Malcolm, Bon was a talismanic figure. "He pulled us all together. He had that real stick-it-to-'em attitude. Bon was the single biggest influence on the band."

How would AC/DC replace a man considered by many to be irreplaceable? To Angus, the answer was simple. "Bon was a unique character," Angus told *Sounds* magazine in March 1980, as auditions for a new singer began, "and we wouldn't like to have someone who was a Bon imitator. We're looking for something that little bit different."

Angus also acknowledged the problems facing potential candidates: "It's difficult for any guy to walk in knowing that Bon's just died, and probably thinking that we're all going to be a bit funny about a new guy singing his songs. That's added pressure."

But, as Angus indicated, there was a change of mood in the AC/DC camp. With strong new material written, and with auditions under way, AC/DC were looking forward, not back. "We'll certainly do our best to put out a great album," Angus said. "And if someone walked in tomorrow and clicked, we'd go straight in and record it, cos we've basically got all the ideas and songs. It just needs that one missing ingredient."

Brian Johnson didn't know it at the time, but he was always the favourite for the job. "My name was on the list up front, but they just couldn't find me," he explains. "I'd fallen off the end of the world, nobody knew where I was."

It was Bon who first told the other guys in AC/DC about Brian, having seen a Geordie gig in the North East of England. He later told Angus that the singer in Geordie had done the best Little Richard impersonation he'd ever seen – he was rolling around on the stage, screaming his head off. "It was rare that Bon ever raved about anything," Angus said. What Bon didn't know was that after that show, Brian was rushed to hospital with appendicitis. He'd been screaming because he was in agony.

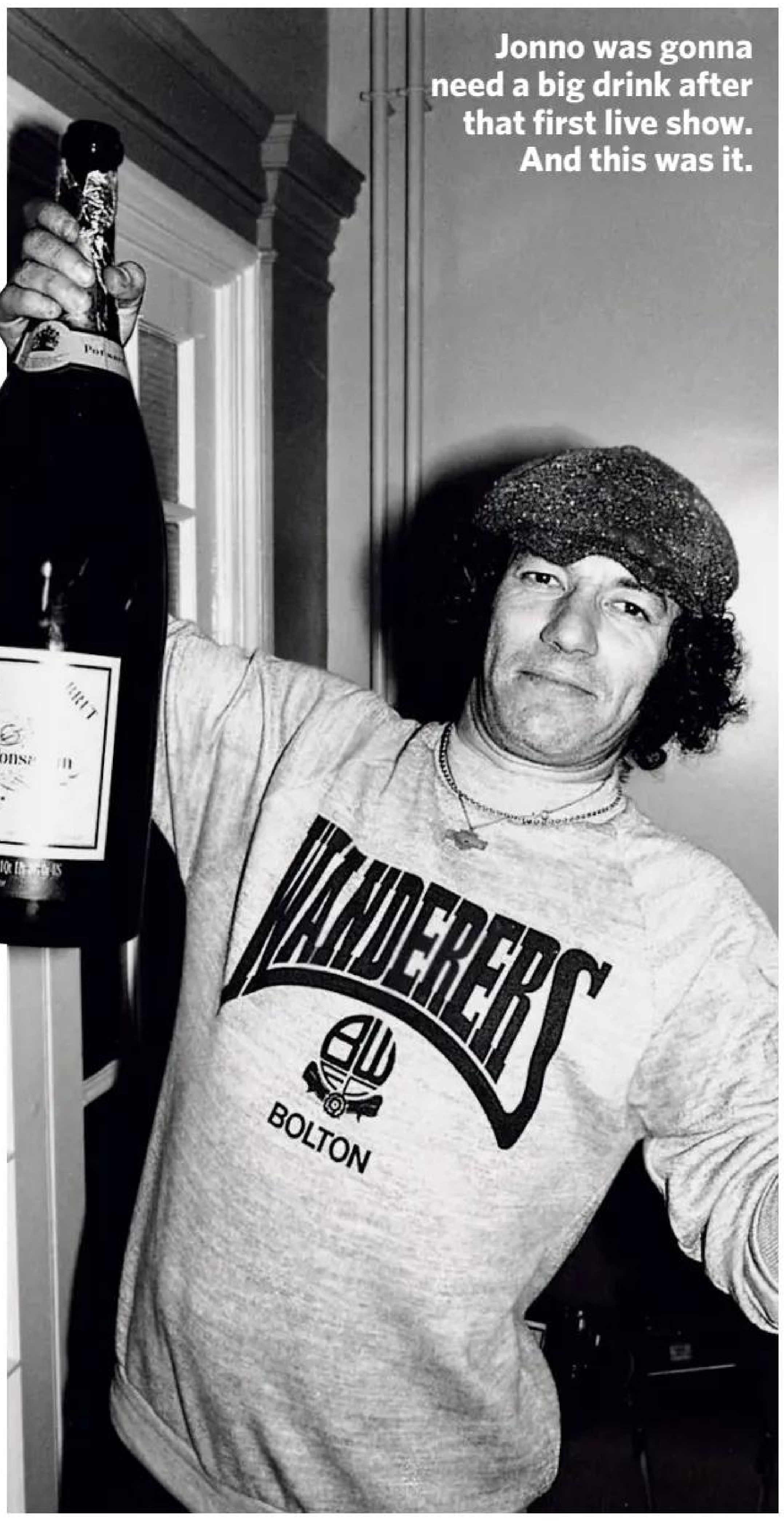
Following Bon's death, an AC/DC fan contacted the band's management to recommend Brian. "It was a guy from Cleveland," Brian recalls. "He sent a Geordie album to them with a letter saying: 'You've gotta listen to this guy.'" And, as Brian later discovered, the producer of *Highway To Hell*, Robert John 'Mutt' Lange, was also aware of Brian. "Mutt had said to the guys: 'Listen, there's one guy you should really listen to.' And I think it was Mal who said: 'That's twice his name's come up.'"

AC/DC's management were instructed to trace Brian. But when they made the call, he remained hesitant. He admits: "I'd been bitten once by the music industry, and I didn't want it to happen again." In the end, he only agreed to audition for AC/DC when another job in London, for a jingle, fell into his lap. "I wasn't gonna do it," he shrugs, "but a friend of mine, Andre, phoned us and said: 'Brian, I have an advert I think would suit you fine. It's £350.' That was a big lump of money. It was a proper job, for Hoover. And I thought, hang on, I could probably go down and do the AC/DC thing on the same day. I just thought, I hope I get this ad thing. Because Andre did tell us: 'There's this big, black soul woman, it's going to be you or her that gets it.' I went: 'Oh Christ!'"

The day Brian travelled to London, the omens were not good. Fearing that his clapped-out Beetle wouldn't make the trip, he borrowed a friend's car, a Toyota Crown. Just a few miles outside Newcastle he got a puncture. "I just went: 'Oh, fuck!' But the strength you had then…" He worked like a maniac to fix the flat tyre, then floored the Toyota down the M1, arriving just in time to meet Andre at the studio in North London. Brian sang the jingle – *'The new high-powered mover from Hoover, it's a little groover!'* – and the £350 was in the bag.

But when he got back in the car and headed across London for his appointment with AC/DC at Vanilla Studios in Pimlico, his confidence evaporated. "I was sitting in this little café just across from the studios and, God, it was miserable. I wanted to go home. I was too nervous to go over there. I just thought I hadn't got a chance of getting the gig, because they don't know me, really. I thought, gosh, they'll be looking for somebody with the long hair, it's not gonna work. Plus they're a young band. I remember getting this pie and a cup of tea, and I couldn't eat the pie cos the fuckin' crust was too hard! I was starving. And I just went: 'Oh, bollocks, better make a move.' I got up and walked across the street. And that was it. That was me changed after that…

"I just remember the lads had been waiting there for quite a while for us, they'd been in that studio a long time, auditioning singers. They were just great. I'd never met such a bunch of non-prats! They were just regular guys. As soon as I walked in I just felt comfortable. Malcolm came over and


Jonno was gonna need a big drink after that first live show. And this was it.

Back In Black **saved AC/DC's career.**

THIS PAGE: (TOP) ROSS HALFIN, (BOTTOM) GETTY

All fired up.

PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

“When you’re young you always feel immortal. But after Bon died I felt horribly grown up.” – **Angus Young**

said: ‘There you go, mate’ – and gave me a bottle of brown ale. He said: ‘You must be thirsty.’ I went: ‘You know what? I could just kill this right now!’ And I did – boy, did I!”

Once the formalities were out of the way, the band asked Brian what song he’d like to sing first. Brian suggested *Nutbush City Limits*, the early-70s rock/soul classic by Ike And Tina Turner. “It was brilliant!” he says. “After we did it I was smiling, and they said: ‘That was a breath of fresh air, mate!’ Everybody that had come in before me had gone: ‘*Smoke On The Water*?’ And the boys were like: ‘No, not again!’” Then came the real test, the clincher. They tried *Whole Lotta Rosie*. “I got tingles singing …*Rosie*,” Brian says. “I had a lucky day, you know?”

Phil Rudd would later state that after that first audition they were sure they’d got their man. But Brian returned to Newcastle none the wiser. Even when he was summoned back to London for a second time he was still uncertain. “They asked us down again and I said: ‘Guys, I cannae be doing this. I got a shop full of cars up here.’ And I did! But I went down in the end.” The second audition passed smoothly, but again the band remained tight-lipped. “I stayed at a hotel overnight with Keith Evans, one of their roadies,” Brian recalls. “Keith was going: ‘I think you’ve got it, mate.’ I said: ‘Nah, I think they’re just making their mind up.’”

It was a few days later that Brian received a call from Malcolm Young. “I’ll never forget it,” Brian smiles. “It was my father’s birthday and I’d been playing pool at The Crown pub. I went back home but there was nobody in the house, mum and pop had gone out somewhere. And the phone rang and it was Mal. He said: ‘We got an album to do, we gotta leave in a couple of weeks, so… if you’re set for it…’ I said: ‘Are you telling me I’ve got the job?’ And he went, ‘Oh yeah.’ I said: ‘I tell you what, mate, I’m gonna put the phone down. Could you ring again in 10 minutes just so I’m sure that it’s not somebody takin’ the piss?’ And he went: ‘Yeah, sure.’ And he phoned back, on the dot, and says: ‘So, are you comin’?’ He still wouldn’t say it! Mal’s not like that. ‘Well, are you comin’ or what?’ And I’m like: ‘Shit, yeah!’ I put the phone down – I didn’t want him to hear this – and I went: ‘Whoah! Fuck!’ I’d bought me pop a bottle of whisky for his birthday present and I just opened it up and took a big swig of it. I was so excited, but I didn’t know who to tell. There wasn’t anybody *to* tell!”

On April 1, 1980 – six weeks after Bon Scott’s death – AC/DC announced Brian Johnson as their new singer. Brian had been itching to tell his younger brother, but when he did his brother just laughed. He thought it was an April Fool’s joke.

“The worst thing was to tell the band I was in,” Brian admits. “After I got back from the first audition, we were doing a show one night and I told them I went down to London and I had a sing – that’s what I called it, ‘a sing’ – with AC/DC. They went: ‘Did you?’ I said: ‘Aye, they were in the studio and they’re auditioning down there and I went and had a sing.’ And they went: ‘Oh, right. Anyway, what are we doing first tonight?’ They never thought anything of it. So later, when I knew I’d got the job, we were playing just west of Newcastle in a working men’s club, and afterwards I said: ‘Guys, I’ve got some news. I hope you’re happy for us, but I’ve been offered this gig with AC/DC.’”

Brian’s first press interview as AC/DC singer was with *Sounds*. He spoke candidly about his hopes and fears. “I still don’t know quite where I am,” he confessed. “All I know is there’s a stack of work to do and the rest of the band have still got to find out about me. I’m still scared shitless, really!”

Brian wasn’t the only one feeling the pressure. As he explains: “The band weren’t in the best financial state at the time, cos the album before, *Highway To Hell*, had cost so much money.”

In London, the new-look AC/DC worked quickly to finish writing the new album. “When I went in, the guys had some titles for songs but no lyrics,” Brian says. “A couple of titles came from the lyrics I wrote later on. But it’s hard to remember, because it was a blur. They didn’t even know what my lyrics were gonna be like. Literally, they said: ‘Can you write some lyrics for us?’ I said: ‘I’ll give it a shot!’”

In late April, with nine tracks completed, the band and producer Mutt Lange flew to the island of Nassau in the Bahamas to record the new album at Compass Point studios. As engineer Tony Platt explained, living and working on a remote island helped to “bring everyone together”.

The first song recorded set the tone for the album. The funky riff that Malcolm had been playing around with on the *Highway To Hell* tour had been fashioned into a crunching anthem titled *Back In Black*. The lyrics were a statement of invincibility and a salute to Bon. *Back In Black*, said Malcolm, was AC/DC remembering “the good times” they’d had with Bon. It was a theme they picked up on again with *Have A Drink On Me*, the song they’d cut as a demo with Bon on drums. The lyrics (‘*Whisky, gin and brandy/With a glass I’m pretty handy*’) were a drunken toast from Brian to his predecessor. And Brian also proved that, like Bon, he had a way with a double-entendre: on *You Shook Me All Night Long* he joked: ‘*She told me to come but I was already there*.’ He says now: “I thought I’d gone too far with that, I must admit, but nobody seemed to mind. There’s a lot of lovely ways you can do things.”

There were times, however, when Brian struggled with lyrics, notably on *Hells Bells*, the mighty epic that ended up as the first track on the album. The riff – dubbed “ominous” by Malcolm and “mystical” by Angus – called for a heavy opening statement, but Brian just couldn’t find the words until he experienced something akin to divine inspiration.

“I was just sitting on my bed one night,” Brian recalls, “and these bedrooms were just breeze-block cells with a bed and a table with a light on it and a toilet. That was it. I was sitting there wondering how good it had been. Cos we were doing it so quick, Mutt would never let me listen to what I’d done because we had to get the guys in straight away. There was no luxury of sitting around thinking, nothing like that. Then Mutt came in and said: ‘Are you all right?’ He was a wonderful man; he knew the pressure I was feeling. I thought: ‘Phew!’ I’d already written three songs and it was day after day. I’m going: ‘I’m fucking running out of ideas here…’

“Mutt says: ‘Tonight we’re gonna do *Hells Bells*, Brian.’ I’m thinking: Hmm… *Hells Bells*, right. I’d just done *Back In Black*, so I thought: ‘Can it get any moodier?’ And then, right at that moment, there was a tropical thunderstorm the likes of which I’d never seen before. Mutt said: ‘Listen… thunder!’ And I said: ‘That’s rolling thunder, that’s what they call it in England.’ He says: ‘Rolling thunder – write that down.’ And this is true – it went ‘boom!’ The fucking rain came down in torrents, you couldn’t hear yourself. And I just went: ‘Pourin’ rain!’ And the wind whipped up – ‘I’m comin’ on like a hurricane!’ I was gone. The song was ready that night. I hadn’t even heard the track cos they were busy doing it. It was whacked down in the greatest haste.”

At the end of their fifth week the band had nine tracks were in the can. They needed one more to finish the album. Malcolm and Angus wrote it in 15 minutes.

“I thought it was just gonna be a boozy chuck-away,” Brian admits. “Mal came up with the title, saying: ’Ere, Jonno, we’ll call it *Rock And Roll Ain’t Noise Pollution*.’ I thought: ‘Eh?’ There’s a great one to fucking rhyme with!

“I’ll never forget the start of it. I went into the recording booth, the intro starts and I hear: ‘Brian, it’s Mutt. Could you say something over that? Just talk.’ I was smoking a tab at the time and you can hear it. I was going: ‘Yeah, all you middle men.’ I just did this southern preacher thing. Honestly, it was one take. I never ever thought that it was gonna be on the record.”

With recording completed, Malcolm Young travelled to New York with Mutt Lange and Tony Platt to mix the album while the rest of the band headed back to London. “I never heard the finished album ’til two months later,” Brian says. “But when I did I was knocked out. I couldn’t believe it was that good… A wonderful album, full of surprises.”

Most surprising of all was the first sound on the album, added at the eleventh hour: the portentous tolling bell for *Hells Bells*. The idea had come to Malcolm when he’d nipped out for a piss during mixing at New York’s Electric Lady studios. Tony Platt dashed across the Atlantic to record a bell at a church in Loughborough. But the bell tower was home to dozens of pigeons that flew noisily from their roost each time the bell was struck, thus ruining Platt’s recording. Thinking on his feet, Platt commissioned a custom-made bell from a specialist foundry in Leicestershire and recorded that.

> “The whole point of that album was to celebrate Bon’s life. The boys had lost a great friend and a great singer – a pal.”
> **– Brian Johnson**

Shake a leg: on stage at Birmingham Odeon on the first *BIB* tour.

GEORGE CHIN

But the end result was worth the trouble. The slow tolling of the bell – spookily, it strikes 13 times – added to the dramatic effect. In addition, the album’s all-black cover design fitted the mood of a band that was emerging from the darkest times. In some quarters at AC/DC’s record label, Atlantic Records, there was resistance to the black cover, but the band wouldn’t yield. The cover was a memorial to Bon. And that was that.

Back In Black was released on July 21, 1980, five months and one day after Bon Scott had died. Within two weeks it topped the UK chart. And in the US, after a slow start, the album was certified platinum in October, when it began an incredible 13-month residency in the *Billboard* Top 10.

Back In Black not only resurrected AC/DC, it took them to a new level, elevating the band to superstar status and transforming Brian Johnson from has-been to hero.

For Brian, the greatest tribute came when AC/DC returned to Australia at the end of the *Back In Black* tour in February 1981. After their gig in Sydney, Bon Scott’s mother, Isa, told him: “Our Bon would have been proud of you, son.” And when he got home to Newcastle there was another moment to savour. After years of driving old bangers, he finally got himself a flashy motor.

“I treated myself to a Chevy Blazer,” he laughs. “It was an SUV – four-wheel drive. It was black-and-white – I was in Newcastle, after all. I’ll never forget, my next door neighbour, he always used to smirk at what I did; he got a new Cortina every four years. And my Chevy was gorgeous! I remember him going: ‘That’s a big, daft, stupid bloody thing, isn’t it?’ I went: ‘You jealous, mate?’ I was dead pleased. It was a big, daft, stupid thing, but I didn’t care. I knew I’d made it.”

Thirty years on, *Back In Black* is the biggest-selling rock album of all time, with worldwide sales now at a staggering 49 million. Its success is all the more amazing given the circumstances in which it was made. But as Malcolm Young said: “We meant it. It’s real. It’s coming from within and was made from what we’d all gone through. That emotion on that record… that will be around forever.”

“It’s funny,” Brian says. “My daughter phoned me the other day and said: ‘Dad, I just wanted to say I’m so proud of you.’ I said: ‘What?’ She said: ‘All these years you’ve just been my dad’ – she’s never been an AC/DC fan, she’s just a regular good girl and all that. But she said: ‘I just didn’t realise how brilliant this album is!’ She said her new favourite songs are *Shoot To Thrill* and *Let Me Put My Love Into You*. I said: ‘I’m pleased you finally got it! How old are ya?’ She says: ‘I’m 36 now, dad!’ I said: ‘You’re older than I was when I did it!’”

Back In Black was the album that saved AC/DC’s career. Guns N’ Roses guitarist Slash even went so far as to say it “saved rock’n’roll”. Not only is it the greatest comeback album of all time, it’s also arguably the greatest rock album ever made.

“The whole point of that album was to celebrate Bon’s life,” Brian says. “The boys had lost a great friend and a great singer – a pal. They’d gone through all their shit together. He wasn’t just a singer in the band, Bon, he was their best pal.”

During the making of *Back In Black* there were times when Brian felt Bon’s spirit with him. “I feel soft saying it,” he admits, “but I was worried. Like, who am I to try to follow in the footsteps of this great poet? Cos Bon really was a kind of poet. And something happened to me – a good thing.”

What Brian Johnson and AC/DC achieved with *Back In Black* was little short of miraculous. But as this most unassuming of rock stars concludes: “I don’t think I could have done it unless it was those particular four boys. If it had been four other gentlemen I don’t think it could’ve happened. This is a special band. They do something to you.”

AC/DC Backtracks is on sale now via Columbia/Albert.

HELL'S BELLS

In 2005, on the 25th anniversary of its release, *Classic Rock* celebrated the enduring appeal of AC/DC's *Back In Black* – the all-time classic album that very nearly didn't get made, but which went on to sell 42 million copies around the globe.

WORDS: GEOFF BARTON AND JENS JAM RASMUSSEN

IT WAS EARLY 1980. It looked like curtains for AC/DC. Of all the cruel tricks fate could have played on the band, this was as bad as it could get. There they were, back in Britain, basking in their hard-earned US success – their first million-selling album, *Highway To Hell*. Bon Scott was getting drunk and getting laid; Angus Young was getting married. All was right with the world.

AC/DC were just starting work on a new record when – or so the popular version of events goes – there was a phone call from their manager. He was at Kings College Hospital, London, identifying the body of a 33-year-old man who'd been found in a car in a puddle of vomit. The manager confirmed that it was the band's frontman, Bon Scott, who had drunk himself to death.

AC/DC were stunned – blank-faced, broken shadows of the band that just three months ago had been opening for – and upstaging – Cheap Trick and Ted Nugent in the States. Now, in a cold and grim South London winter, Angus and Malcolm Young looked battle- shocked.

"We were so depressed," Malcolm said. "We were just walking around in silence. Because there was nothing. Nothing." ➤

"BON USED TO SAY THAT BRIAN WAS A GREAT ROCK'N'ROCK SINGER IN THE LITTLE RICHARD MOULD."

ANGUS YOUNG

Rewind to a short time earlier. It was a couple of weeks into February 1980 when AC/DC's core songwriting team – that's brothers Angus and Malcolm Young, of course – met up in a rehearsal studio in London called E-Zee Hire.

As soon as the Youngs arrived they plugged in their guitars to work on some tracks for the follow-up to *Highway To Hell*. The duo had plenty of ideas already. The songwriting process for their new album had begun the previous year – in hotel rooms, during snatched moments backstage and on the tour bus – while the band had been out on the road.

Angus and Malcolm were strumming away energetically when their singer, Bon Scott, walked into the studio.

"Need a drummer, fellas?" quipped Scott, alluding to his pre-AC/DC career when he doubled up on drums and vocals in small-time Australian bands. "I like to keep my hand in, y'know."

"Alright, mate," chorused the Youngs. "There's a drum kit right over there."

A loose, light-hearted session commenced. After some general mucking about Angus and Malcolm began to pummel out a riff that sounded mightily distinctive. Bon allied himself to the beat. Swiftly and surely, a song that would eventually be titled *Have A Drink On Me* took shape. Later Bon helped formulate the drum intro to a second song – one of Malcolm's that would gain the moniker *Let Me Put My Love Into You*.

At the end of the rehearsals Bon downed his sticks and suggested another meeting next week. "That'll give me time to write some lyrics. Then we can have another go at the songs."

"See you then," the brothers replied, quietly satisfied with the way the new tunes were developing at this early demo phase – and even with someone other than Phil Rudd on drums.

Bon Scott said his goodbyes and left the studio. He never returned.

A few days later, on Wednesday, February 20, the terrible news reached Angus, Malcolm and the other folks in the AC/DC camp. Their frontman was dead.

The band were stunned and the global rock'n'roll community was shocked to its foundations. But the mourning was not only for the man who had been christened Ronald Belford Scott. It was also for AC/DC. Surely, people speculated, they could never recover from the blow of losing such a key member – a man whose roughhouse image, raucous vocals and lewd lyricism were such key elements of their success

* * *

The previous year, 1979, had been a remarkable one in AC/DC's history. Major changes in the band's camp had been followed by the huge artistic and commercial success of *Highway To Hell*. Released in the summer, it hit No.8 in the UK and became their first chart album in the US, where it peaked at No.17. The title track was also a Top 50 single in the States.

Those 'major changes' had occurred at the beginning of the year when AC/DC announced plans to make their first album without their long-time producers, former Easybeats men Harry Vanda and George Young (the latter being the elder brother of Angus and Malcolm).

Around the same time, AC/DC also acquired a powerful new manager – Peter Mensch, an aggressive, no-nonsense American – as the successor to Michael Browning. Previously employed by the Leber-Krebs organisation in New York, Mensch had helped develop the careers of monster US rock acts such as Aerosmith and Ted Nugent earlier in the 70s. In later years Mensch would go on to help create the mighty Q-Prime company with his partner Cliff Burnstein. Q-Prime's biggest client: Metallica.

(When *Classic Rock* approached Peter Mensch to contribute to this story he responded via a typically terse email, claiming, somewhat bizarrely, to 'have forgotten most of it'.)

At the beginning of spring '79 AC/DC spent a three-week-long but sadly unproductive period working on new material with producer Eddie Kramer (Jimi Hendrix, Kiss) in Miami.

According to Malcolm Young, "Kramer was a bit of a prat, to be honest with you. He looked at Bon and said to us: 'Can your guy sing?' He might've sat behind the knobs for Hendrix, but he's certainly not Hendrix, I can tell you that much."

Frustrated by the lack of progress AC/DC left Florida and relocated back to the UK. Having failed to connect with the vastly experienced Kramer, they decided to give an up-and-coming producer a try: a guy called Robert John 'Mutt' Lange.

Born in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Lange had only a few studio credits under his belt, including the Boomtown Rats, City Boy, The Motors and Graham Parker. But working with AC/DC would prove to be the turning point in his career. He would later make sweet music with Def Leppard, Foreigner, The Cars, Bryan Adams, Heart and many more, including Shania Twain (the latter in the marital home as well as the studio).

Ex-manager Browning, who gave up running a club in Melbourne, Australia, to guide AC/DC's early career, had originally recommended Lange to the band. (Browning, it was thought, had taken AC/DC as far as he could. The consensus was that they needed someone with more muscle-power to fully capitalise on their success in the US market.)

Whatever, when AC/DC and Lange met to lay down some early *Highway To Hell* tracks at the Roundhouse Studios in North London it soon became clear the producer wanted to add a little polish to AC/DC's typical rock'n'roll dynamics. As AC/DC still sounded in-your-face but their choruses were more melodic and structured. Lange did an admirable job in refining and sharpening the band's songs without losing the raw edge that was the source of their original appeal.

But the recording process took a while. AC/DC were used to polishing off an album in three weeks; under Lange's tutleage that period extended to three months.

Angus Young summed up Lange's contribution succinctly at the time: "He's very much the sound guy. With AC/DC that was his big thing. He was always trying to get tuned in on the sound quality. We were always ones for the groove quality and the song quality."

On the road in the UK and Europe to promote *Highway To Hell*, AC/DC toured with up-and-coming New Wave Of British Heavy Metal bands such as Def Leppard and Diamond Head, as well as the more established Judas Priest. In the US they were the tough act Cheap Trick and Ted Nugent had to follow. Returning to Britain, AC/DC were special guests to their own favourite band, The Who, at a one-off show at Wembley Stadium on August 18.

AC/DC ended their *Highway To Hell* tour with six shows at London's old Hammersmith Odeon (now the Apollo) during Christmas '79 – apart from a couple of rescheduled gigs in Newcastle and Southampton the following January.

* * *

AC/DC were poised for megastardom as the 1980s began. Besides the tracks they had worked on in the E-Zee Hire studio, Malcolm Young had already pretty much gotten a whole new song together. Starting with an incredible pounding riff, it would become the title track for the band's first album of the new decade: *Back In Black*.

But then the unthinkable had happened: Bon Scott died.

In the days and weeks after February 20 – while the British rock press published their tributes and obituaries about AC/DC's frontman – the remaining band members were preparing themselves disconsolately for a funeral service to be held where Bon Scott grew up: the harbour town of Fremantle just south of the West Australian city of Perth. The date was to be March 1.

Speaking to *Classic Rock* exclusively, 25 years after the funeral, Angus clearly recalls meeting up with Bon's parents in Freemantle – and what that fateful encounter meant to the future of the band.

"We flew back to Australia and spent some time with Bon's mum [Isa] and dad [Charles, also known as Chick]. I remember Bon's dad saying to Malcolm and me: 'You must continue with AC/DC. You're young guys, you're on the brink of major success and you can't afford to give up now.' But I'll be honest with you – we weren't really listening; we were so wrapped up in our grief. Bon's dad kept repeating his assurances. He told us time and again: 'You should keep going, you've still got a lot to give.'"

Despite the encouragement, Angus and Malcolm weren't in the mood for creating any kind of new music. Yet.

"We were heartbroken," says Angus bluntly. "Okay, we knew the world had lost a big talent and, of course, our fans were devastated. But… we had lost much more. We had lost a friend – a very close friend. A person you bonded with in life. Honestly, we didn't know what to do with ourselves at the time."

Contrary to popular belief, AC/DC didn't immediately – and, as some have claimed, obscenely – get down to the business of auditioning for replacement singers in the days after Bon's demise.

As Malcolm Young told us: "Peter Mensch approached us on the plane on the flight back to the UK [after Bon Scott's funeral] saying he had a list of singers' names for us to look at.

I just couldn't be bothered. I remember waving them away and just thinking it's not fucking right, you know?"

But as the days in March slowly passed Angus and Malcolm pulled themselves together for another effort on what still remained a very uncertain album project.

LARRY HULST/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

CLASSIC ENCOUNTER

On the road in the US in 1980, Laura Canyon encountered a distinctly different, Bon Scott-less AC/DC.

In the immediate aftermath of Bon Scott's death, once in a while the brothers Angus and Malcolm Young would get together and, without saying a word, noodle a few things on their guitars, then put their instruments back in their cases without a word.

Now and again their manager might pop in with a pep talk or a list of singers they might audition. But like Angus said: "None of it made any sense." Particularly that Bon – who'd survived no end of dangers, from being chased with guns by irate husbands, to single-handedly taking on armed hecklers at the wilder Australian bars they played in their early days – could be killed by something so innocuous and ordinary as having a few too many drinks with a mate at the Music Machine in London's Camden Town while watching a bunch of bands.

"Bon," said Angus, "is irreplaceable."

And that was the last I heard – until the summer of 1980, when I was back in the United States, as were AC/DC, on their triumphant *Back In Black* world tour.

To the sound of an ominously, slowly tolling bell, the band took the stage. And in the place where we used to see a wiry ball of tattoos and testosterone with a shark's tooth in his ear, was a beer-bellied Geordie with a wide grin – and a flat cap on his head. Brian Johnson's powerful, glass-gargling vocals sounded magnificent. And these zombies I'd seen in London six months back looked like someone had filled them with jet-propeller fuel and lit a match.

Meeting Brian backstage for the first time was an experience. It was one of those anonymous Midwestern sports arenas, all concrete and fluorescent lights. There was a bowl of M&Ms on the table, a waste bin full of ice and Budweiser, and a bunch of girls batting their eyelashes at Brian.

Had it been Bon, they would not have been upright, but Brian's just sitting there like the cat that's got the cream, chortling to himself and opening another beer. Angus comes in with a cup of tea.

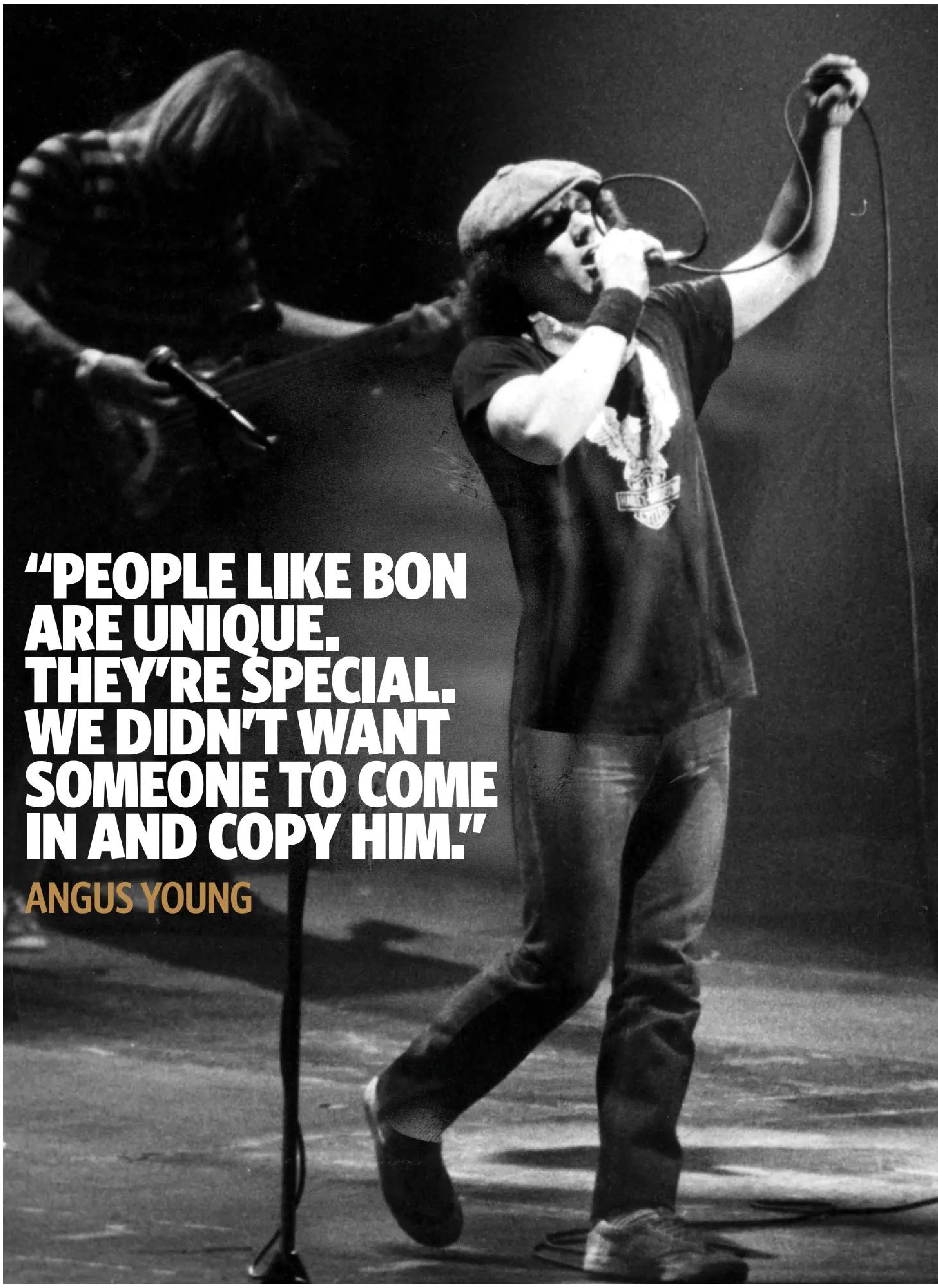
"I'll have one of them," says Brian.

One of the groupies, I ask?

He laughs fit to choke. "You're fookin' jokin', lass. I'm married with two kids. That's for the crew."

If there was a more down-to-earth rock star on the US arena circuit that year, I never met him. And the warmth between Brian and the band is palpable. Bon's dad, Malcolm relates, had told them at the funeral that Bon would've wanted the band to go on. As chance would have it, the singer of one of Bon's favourites, Geordie, was unemployed. "They phoned us up and said would I like to come and give it a go," says Brian.

"And he did," says Malcolm, "and he put a smile on our faces – for the first time since Bon."



"PEOPLE LIKE BON ARE UNIQUE. THEY'RE SPECIAL. WE DIDN'T WANT SOMEONE TO COME IN AND COPY HIM."

ANGUS YOUNG

TB/TS/KEYSTONE USA/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Angus: "When we got back to London after the funeral we didn't really get together too much. But after a couple of weeks or so, Malcolm called me up and said: 'Instead of the two of us just sitting around and moping, doing nothing, why don't we do some work? At least that'll keep us together.'"

So the brothers closeted themselves away in their rehearsal studio and adopted a siege mentality.

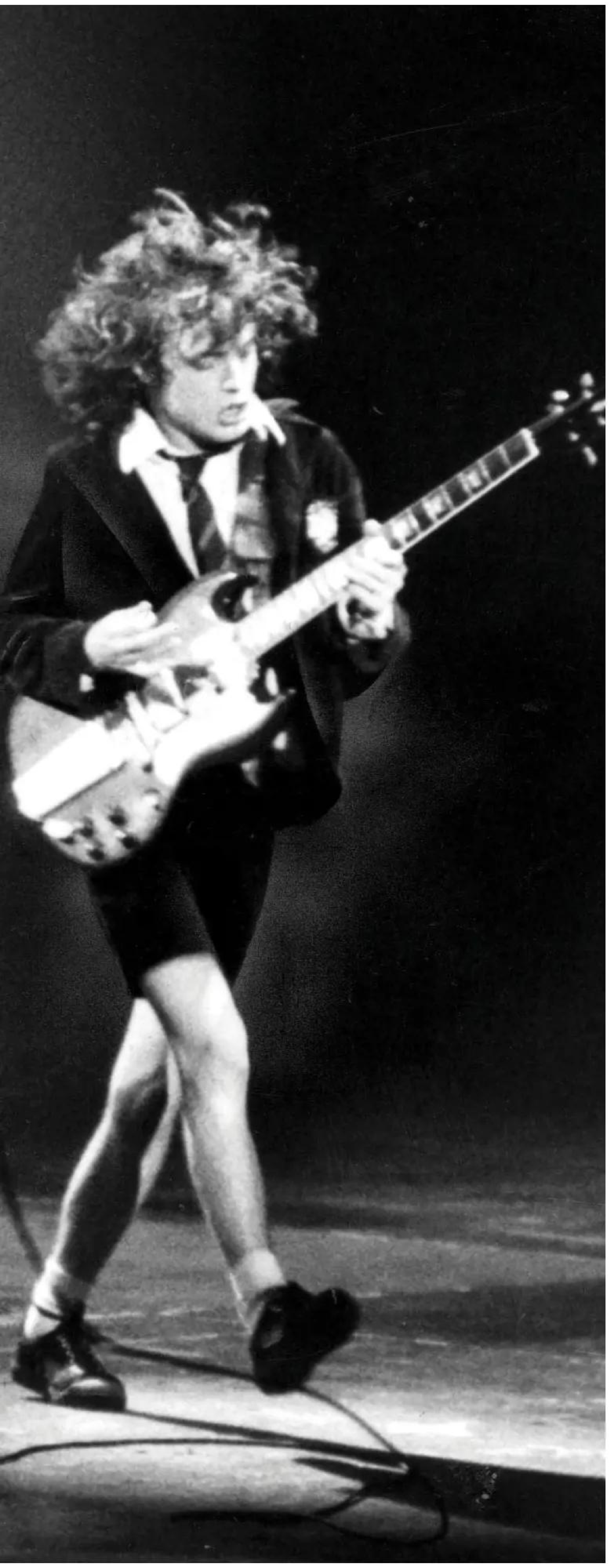
Angus: "We shut the doors and we didn't think of record companies, managers, or anything like that. We just hid ourselves away and worked on our songs."

A veil of secrecy descended. "There were a lot of rumours going around at the time," he continues. "People wanted to know what we were up to and what our plans were. Journalists were calling up our record company and asking for interviews. But it was much too early. We shied away from all that. We didn't want any pressures from outside.

"I guess we retreated into our music. At the time we weren't really capable of dealing with very much. We'd lost someone very close to us and we weren't thinking very clearly. But we decided working was better than sitting there, still in shock about Bon. So in some ways it was therapeutic, you know."

The album that was to become *Back In Black* began to come together. But the future of AC/DC was still very much up in the air.

Angus: "We didn't really know if the material we had was decent enough. We didn't have much of a perspective on things. So, what kept us going? Well, Malcolm and me had started the band together and, subconsciously I suppose, we didn't want it to end. We didn't want to leave things unfinished. We'd worked on a few songs with Bon just before his death, after all. And his dad wanted us to carry on. We couldn't bear to turn around



and say: 'That's it, we're not doing do it any more.'"

Soon enough, the obvious issue of a new AC/DC singer came in to the frame.

Angus: "Even though we had locked ourselves away people were still taking an interest in us. It wasn't only journalists. Peter Mensch was in close contact and he was always asking: 'What are you doing? What are you up to? Look, guys, have I still got a band to manage?'

"After a while, when we felt we were close to having all the songs together, we knew we had to confront the question of a new singer. But it wasn't like we put an advertisement in a music paper that said: 'AC/DC want a new frontman.' No… that would have been too over the top. It was subtler than that. People like Bon are unique. They're special. And we didn't want someone to come in and copy him. If anything, we wanted someone who was their own character."

Numerous and varied frontmen were rumoured to be queuing up to stake their claim as Bon Scott's replacement.

Among them were Stevie Wright from The Easybeats (the 60s band mentioned earlier); Allen Fryer from Oz band Fat Lip (later to be renamed Heaven); Londoner Gary Holton from the 70s group the Heavy Metal Kids; Englishman Steve Burton, the gravel-voiced singer who fronted Angus and Malcolm's cousin Stevie Young's act The Starfighters; Jimmy Barnes; and an older guy named Terry Wilson-Slesser who had found fame in Back Street Crawler, the band formed by ex-Free guitarist Paul Kossoff.

Another singer, Marc Storace, of Swiss band Krokus, even claimed to have been offered the AC/DC position. He said: "I wasn't even tempted, because I believed Krokus were going to continue to get bigger. But back then I was cocky and naïve."

Speaking today, Angus is still cagey about the audition process.

"All I can say is that lot of people were being suggested. Old friends were calling us up and saying: 'Hey, I know someone who could do the job.' And people who you're familiar with, who you know quite well… you do invite them along and give them a listen, don't you?"

Allen Fryer actually left his band Fat Lip to stake his claim as Bon Scott's successor.

Fryer said: "I had spoken with Albert Productions [the Australian record label and worldwide publishers of AC/DC] and they were interested. I just dropped everything and tried out for AC/DC. They took Bon's voice out of the tapes on songs like *Whole Lotta Rosie, Shot Down In Flames, Sin City*, all that stuff. They shoved my voice in on them.

"I went back to Adelaide and found out from George [Young] and Harry [Vanda] that I had gotten the gig. Then it came on a TV show that local boy Allen Fryer is the new singer for AC/DC. I said: 'What the hell?' Nobody was supposed to know anything like this. So George and Harry wanted me in the band, but meanwhile the boys [AC/DC] were in London at the time and they were trying out some other guys..."

One of those 'other guys' was an unlikely figure: a stocky fella in a cloth cap, named Brian Johnson. Hailing from County Durham in the north-east of England, Johnson was in the process of trying to relaunch his 70s band Geordie, one-hit wonders in the UK whose single *All Because Of You* reached No.6 in the chart in early '73.

Twenty-five years down the line, it's now clear that Bon Scott had a posthumous effect in picking his successor.

Angus: "We certainly knew Bon was a fan of Brian Johnson's. Bon had seen Brian in England [in 1973] and had been very impressed by him. Bon was touring with a band he was in before AC/DC called Fraternity, and they opened up for Geordie.

"Bon was a big Little Richard fan – he believed that anyone singing rock'n'roll would have to match Little Richard. I remember Bon saying that Brian was a great rock'n'roll singer in the Little Richard mould. Bon used to buy a lot of classic rock'n'roll records and he would bring them in for me to listen to, because I was the youngest [of the AC/DC members]. Bon used to say to me: 'Have you heard this record yet, Angus? This is one of my favourites.' That was an important part of my musical education."

BACK IN BLACK TRACK-BY-TRACK

Hells Bells
That oh-so-familiar deep, resonating, tolling bell – it's one the greatest beginnings to an album, ever. Massive and eerie, Brian Johnson asserts his authority straightaway with his howling, growling vocals.

Shoot To Thrill
A perfect riposte to the grime-packed, gloom-ridden Hell's Bells. Catchy guitar work and fun lyrics in the finest AC/DC tradition.

What Do You Do For The Money, Honey
If you're looking for tender love songs, you've bought the wrong disc. As savage musically as it is lyrically, this one is a rant against rich-bitch prostitutes: 'You're loving on the take/And you're always on the make/Squeezing all the blood out of men.' Doesn't exactly glamourise the world's oldest profession.

Give The Dog A Bone
A song about nutrition for pets? Nosiree. This rollicking ramrod of a track remains one of AC/DC's finest, although doubtless Bon Scott would've been a little less heavy-handed with the lyrics.

Let Me Put My Love Into You
More bone-age rampage.

Back In Black
Angus's brilliant stumbling riff and Jonno's impassioned, imploring vocals make the title song a high-voltage AC/DC classic.

You Shook Me All Night Long
The album's first single. A compulsive stomper that was aTtop 40 hit on both sides of the Atlantic.

Have A Drink On Me
At the time, AC/DC were criticised for including a track with a title such as this, given the manner of Bon Scott's death. Twenty-five years on, those objections have dimmed and it sounds like a simple – but undeniably raucous – celebration of Bon's party-hard lifestyle.

Shake A Leg
Includes the lyric 'dirty women on machines'. A worrying combination. A song that's popular with Jake The Peg; less so with Long John Silver. And as for Douglas Bader...

Rock & Roll Ain't Noise Pollution
Inspired a generation of boy racers in souped-up Fiestas to chase old age pensioners off pavements with their cars' million-watt sub-woofers belting out the latest UK garage malarkey.

Recalling those fond memories, Angus and the boys agreed to try out Brian Johnson as AC/DC's new singer. 'Jonno', as he would become known, got the call to come down to London and rehearse with the band on Grand National day: March 29, 1980. But at first AC/DC couldn't find him. Then they discovered he was downstairs playing pool with their roadies. The band couldn't help but laugh. Brian sounded just like the kind of down-to-earth guy they needed.

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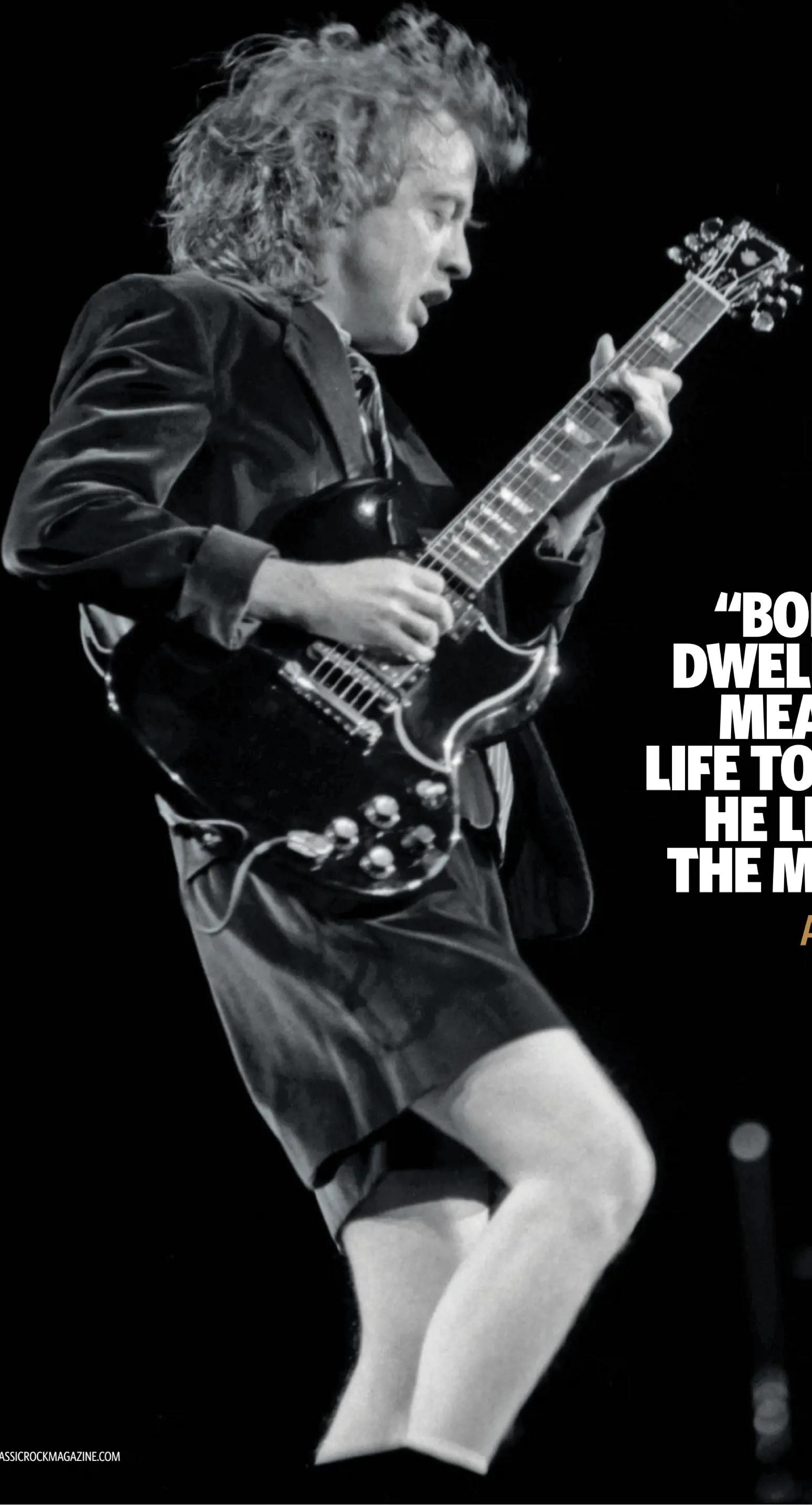


“BON DIDN’T DWELL ON THE MEANING OF LIFE TOO MUCH. HE LIVED FOR THE MOMENT.”

ANGUS YOUNG

Johnson sang *Whole Lotta Rosie* at his audition; it was a brave move to tackle a track so intimately associated with Bon Scott. Another audition song was rumoured to be Ike & Tina Turner's *Nutbush City Limits*, but Angus Young can't confirm it.

"We could have [done it] at the time," he says. "I think Malcolm asked him [Brian]: 'Tell us which songs you feel comfortable with.' And Brian said he knew *Whole Lotta Rosie*, so we played that. Brian also wanted to try *Highway To Hell*. Malcolm said: 'What else do you want to try?' And I think we played a rock'n'roll song, maybe a Little Richard one or something."

How much time elapsed from the audition until Brian Johnson joined AC/DC officially?

Angus: "Well, there were some other people we had to see, so I suppose it was a few weeks, you know." But Angus's brother Malcolm apparently made up his mind on the spot: "Brian sang great. It [Johnson's audition] put a little smile on our face – for the first time since Bon."

As Johnson told *Classic Rock* after being offered the job: "I remember thinking to myself: 'Oh Brian, what have you got yourself into?' I wasn't scared though, I was excited. I looked at it like, well, if I do get fired I can tell me mates I was in AC/DC for a couple of weeks, and I'd had a nice holiday in London."

Realistically, no one expected Brian's 'holiday' to last 25 years – and counting. The recording of *Back In Black* was set to take place at Compass Point Studios in the exotic city of Nassau in the sunny Bahamas, at the end of April through to May – once again with Robert John 'Mutt' Lange at the production helm. But, as Angus stresses, the band did have the option to abort the recording process if they felt as though the album wasn't working out as intended.

"There was a little bit of pressure to it – a commitment that we had to complete the record by a certain target date. But equally, it was case of… We could've gone in and recorded some tracks and said: 'No, we don't like them, it doesn't feel right,' you know."

After a couple of weeks rehearsing their new songs with Brian Johnson in London, AC/DC flew to The Bahamas. They arrived during a lull in a storm that raged across the island for the next three days. As Johnson recalled: "It wasn't a tropical paradise. It wasn't all white beaches. It was pissing it down, there was flooding and all the electricity went out – nae television."

Not the most auspicious start. But the inclement weather had one benefit: it provided the inspiration for the opening lines to *Back In Black*'s first track, *Hells Bells*: 'I'm the rolling thunder, the pouring rain/I'm comin' on like a hurricane.'

Angus: "We pretty much had all the tracks together. The last track we completed was *Rock & Roll Ain't Noise Pollution* which Malcolm and me actually wrote there [in The Bahamas]. We felt that we were a track short and we spent a few days writing it in between guitar overdubs and the other things we were doing on the record."

The title *Rock & Roll Ain't Noise Pollution* was rumoured to be a line Bon Scott had originally used in an argument with his landlord.

Malcolm: "That's not true. The song was about London's old Marquee Club when it was in Wardour Street. It was in a built-up area and there was this whole thing about noise pollution in the news, the whole environmental health thing. That's where it came from."

What about the remainder of *Back In Black*'s lyrics? Angus admits: "A lot of ideas, choruses, song titles and lyrical snippets were already in place before Brian arrived."

Rumours persist that AC/DC took the majority of *Back In Black*'s lyrics from a notebook Bon Scott had left behind after his death.

Angus denies it vehemently: "No, there was nothing from Bon's notebook. [After his death] all his stuff went direct to his mother and his family. It was personal material – letters and things. It wouldn't have been right to hang on to it. It wasn't ours to keep."

The recording of *Back In Black* continued apace, but the studio in Nassau wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Johnson: "This big old black lady ruled that place with a rod of iron. We had to lock the doors at night because she'd warned us about these Haitians who'd come down at night and rob the place. So she bought us all these six-foot fishing spears to keep at the fucking door! It was a bit of a stretch from Newcastle, I can tell you."

Reports of a machete-wielding tourist killer prowling the beach nearby doubtless focused AC/DC's attentions still further. But it wasn't all stress. Malcolm: "It was the best place to do that album because there was nothing going on. We'd sit through the night with a couple of bottles of rum with coconut milk in and work. That's where a lot of the lyric ideas came from."

The band polished off *Black In Black* in about six weeks, which was a lightning-fast turnaround by 'Sloth' Lange standards. So, what was it like recording with Mutt again but with a completely new singer?

"It was very good – for both us and him, I think," Angus replies. "After he made *Highway To Hell* he was in big demand, but I thought it was good for him [to record with AC/DC again]. Especially after what had happened to us. It's to Mutt's credit that he still wanted to be involved with us after Bon's death."

Classic Rock approached the notoriously reclusive Lange for an interview for this story. The man who has been dubbed 'the Howard Hughes of rock producers' politely but firmly turned down our request.

At the end of the recording session Johnson was mightily relieved. He told *Classic Rock*: "It was about three in the afternoon, it was a beautiful sunny day and I went outside down to where the huts were. I sat on this wall and I got a ciggie out and sat among the trees. I was so happy that I'd done it. But I hadn't really heard one song. I'd go in and do a couple of verses, pop back and do a chorus. That's the way Mutt keeps you interested, you know."

Ultimately, Johnson's only complaint concerned the high notes on *Shake A Leg*: "Oh, that was

➤

BACK IN BLACK: THE LYRICAL DEBATE

Did Bon Scott help shape AC/DC's milestone album? Malcolm Dome reports...

It's been one of the greatest controversies in the history of AC/DC: did the late Bon Scott actually write any of the lyrics for the *Back In Black* album? Bearing in mind that Scott died on February 19, 1980, and that Back In Black came out a mere five months later, is it just possible that he did have an input? Officially, Bon is not credited with writing anything for the album, but there's a lot more to this scenario than the superficial.

Firstly, Ian Jeffrey – AC/DC's tour manager at the time – claims to have a file of papers containing lyrics written by Scott for the record. The band themselves have never denied this story, but insist all of these were scrapped, and that the Young brothers (Angus and Malcolm) and new vocalist Brian Johnson subsequently wrote a whole new batch for *Back In Black*.

Now, I can personally attest that Bon did indeed write some lyrics in preparation for the record, having seen a few sheets myself. This was just a couple of days prior to the man's death, at a venue called the Music Machine in Camden, North London (which became the Camden Palace, and is now known as Koko), a popular hang-out for the charismatic frontman and other like-minded musos such as Lemmy.

Bon proudly showed me some of the scribbles he'd put down in preparation for an album he felt would define AC/DC – and open up new possibilities as well. It's hard to be absolutely accurate from a distance of a quarter of a century, and through the haze of alcohol which enveloped the night, but one line sticks in my mind as being on one of those sheets: 'She told me to come, but I was already there.' A renowned lyric from the song *You Shook Me All Night Long*, it has Bon's trademark all over it – a neatly worked double entendre that fits in with the track record of a man who wrote *Big Balls, The Jack* and other similarly styled songs.

But there's further, albeit circumstantial, evidence that leads AC/DC aficionados to suggest Bon Scott did play a role on *Back In Black*. Compare lyrics like '*She's using her head*' from *Give The Dog A Bone* with the Scott-era output of the band, and then with the subsequent albums written with Johnson; it seems clear that they belong more to the former's approach than the latter's. The fact is that Scott was a sprightly weaver of streetwise words, whereas Johnson is a lot less subtle.

Of course, unless somebody unearths the actual sheaves of paper on which Scott wrote his ideas for *Back In Black* there will never be any proof of his involvement. And it must be pointed out nobody has ever doubted that the majority of the lyrics were written after his death. However, the nagging doubt remains. One fuelled when the Bonfire box set was released in 1997, containing solely Bon Scott recordings, plus (inexplicably) *Back In Black*. Just why was Back In Black included? Was that 'DC's way of indirectly acknowledging their debt to him on that album?

But, as a final thought, let's scupper one myth. Bon Scott never recorded any demos for *Back In Black*. Over the years, so many have insisted that these tapes exist. However, don't you think if that were case, then someone, somewhere, would have got them into the public domain? It's just another myth surrounding this classic band.

DAVID CORIO/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

BONG! THE STORY OF AC/DC'S HELLS BELL

Malcolm Young even had a ring-a-ding replica cast, Dave Ling discovers.

As the lights dim and curtains open, one of the most famous and iconic stage props of all time gradually descends from the ceiling. Above the audience's din comes the tolling of a huge bronze bell, clouted by a man wearing a flat cap.

Slowly and precisely, the musicians lurch into the concert's opening song. 'I got my bell, I'm gonna take you to Hell,' squeals the singer animatedly, 'I'm gonna get ya! Satan get ya...'

As rock theatre goes, what we're witnessing is pure, unforgettable genius. Indeed, the only way AC/DC could follow it with their next album was with a 21-gun cannon salute.

Weighing just over a ton, the band's now legendary bell was manufactured in the UK for 1980's world tour to promote *Back In Black*, their debut with new singer Brian Johnson. The idea of using it to preface the album and their shows came while working with producer 'Mutt' Lange.

"A phone call came from a recording studio [Compass Point] in the Bahamas," recalls Steve Cake, whose father worked at John Taylor Bellfounders at the time, and is now employed himself by the same Loughborough-based company. "I was only a kid of course, but the situation made me come in and nose around."

The band's first choice of a bell that pealed the note of 'C' would've been twice as heavy, so they scaled it down. While AC/DC worked in Nassau, the Manor Mobile was sent to the midlands to record the album's intro. According to fans of AC/DC minutiae, with the group's own bell still being tuned, a similar one at Loughborough's War Memorial was captured for posterity instead.

"Untrue," insists Cake. "The traffic and birds chirping made that recording unusable. So the work [on the AC/DC bell] was speeded up, and what you hear on the album was definitely recorded at our factory."

So now you know. Cake believes that the original bell - manufactured for £6,000 in 1980; it'd now cost twice as much - is still in AC/DC's possession, despite various rumours to the contrary.

"Someone said they saw it in a shop window in Sydney, but we think that some fibre-glass copies must have been made," he reveals. "When the band play live, the bell swings out over the crowd. You couldn't possibly do that with something that weighs a ton."

It's hard to believe the group would ever sell their pride and joy, especially when one considers that guitarist Malcolm Young later commissioned JTB to mould him a smaller replica.

"I believe he used it to replace a candelabra at his Hertfordshire house," divulges Steve. "Apparently there's a sweeping staircase that now has this bell right at the top."

When *Classic Rock* readers learn the above, it could initiate a whole new line in merchandising. Indeed, Steve states that anyone visiting www.taylorbells.co.uk will find themselves in luck.

"In the album's anniversary year we can make anything that people want," he confirms, "so long as their money's the right colour."

Malcolm Young: replaced a candelabra with one of the stage bells at his Hertfordshire house.

LARRY HULST/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

fucking way up. Some of those notes will never be heard by man again."

Released in America on July 21, 1980, and in Britain and Europe 10 days later, *Back In Black* stormed to the No.1 position in the UK album chart. It reached No. 4 in the US where it stayed in the chart for 131 weeks.

Last year – as befits an album that contains a track called *Have A Drink On Me* – *Back In Black* passed the 'Double Diamond' mark for sales in the States alone. That means more than 20 million copies sold – in other words, 20 times platinum – a record beaten by only five other records: the Eagles' *Greatest Hits* (28 million) Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (26 million), Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (23 million), *Led Zeppelin IV* (22 million) and Billy Joel's *Greatest Hits* (21 million)

In the US *Back In Black* is now in front of *The Beatles'* White Album, Shania Twain's *Come On Over* and Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* (all on 19 million). On a worldwide basis the album has passed 42 million sales.

Even today Angus can't quite believe it. "Those are incredible figures. Mind-boggling. All we've ever done, throughout our career, is record stuff we hope our fans will like. Nothing has been premeditated. That's how we've always approached it. We've been that way since the beginning. When we first started playing live, it was always a case of: what do the people who're paying money to see us want to hear?"

Back In Black also pays tribute to Bon Scott. Angus: "Well, that was the whole idea. The cover was black and the album began with the sound of a tolling bell."

But it ain't all doom and gloom. The album is full of seductive party tunes like *Shoot To Thrill* and *You Shook Me All Night Long*. "Yes, because you have to remember that Bon enjoyed a good party. When someone dies people often hold a wake, something that's more of a celebration of a person's life. Bon didn't dwell on the meaning of life too much. He lived for the moment."

Twenty-five years after its release *Back In Black* still stands the test of time remarkably well. And it continues to work on two levels.

To the occasional buyer of rock records – the weekend warrior, if you will; someone who is

unconcerned about the finite details of AC/DC history – *Back In Black* retains a commanding power and presence.

To dyed-in-the-wool AC/DC fans *Back In Black* is also as vital as ever – and for them it serves as an important link between the Bon Scott era and the rebirth of the band. The album is a turbulent mix of emotions: there's a discernible anger about Bon's untimely death coupled with a teeth-gritting determination to carry on.

We asked Angus Young what makes him most proud about *Back in Black* today? He replied sombrely: "It's the fact that we were strong enough at the time to keep ourselves together and see our way through a major tragedy."

AC/DC played their first gig with Brian Johnson in the town of Maur,in Belgium. It was July 1 in the summer of 1980. Five months earlier, in a cold and grim South London winter, it had looked like curtains for the band. And then suddenly the band were back. In black.

Thanks to Philip Wilding and Laura Canyon for their help with this story.

Slade playing at the Reading Festival in 1980.

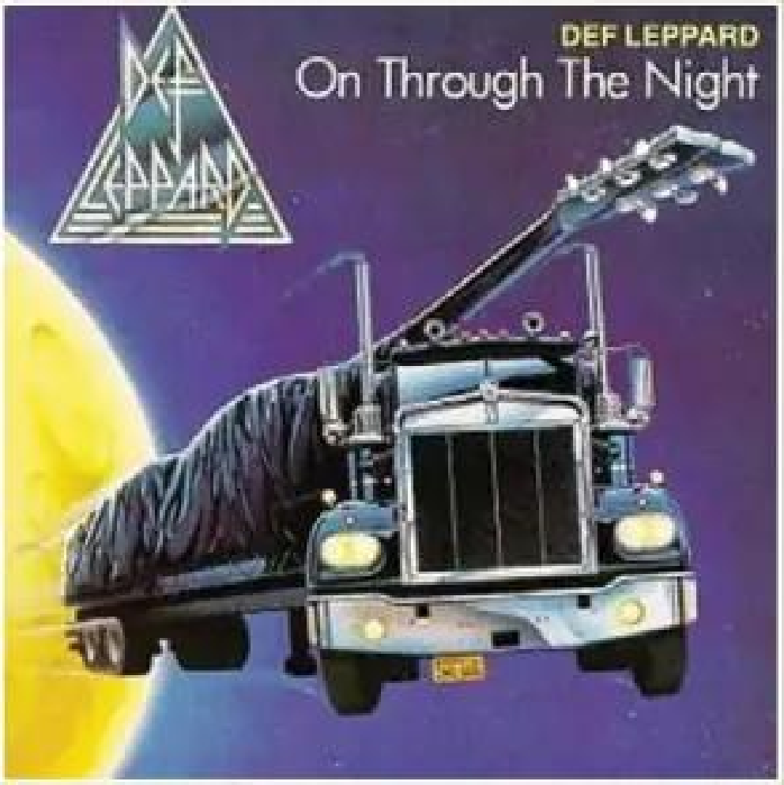
PETER STILL/GETTY IMAGES

WAS 1980 THE GREATEST YEAR IN METAL HISTORY?

It wasn't only *Back In Black*. Malcolm Dome looks back at a memorable 12 months for loud music.

What have Donington, plus the albums *Heaven & Hell*, *Ace Of Spades*, *On Through The Night* and *Iron Maiden* got in common with *Black In Black*? Simple - they year 1980.

Not only was this the year when AC/DC released the biggest album of their career, but also the one that saw Black Sabbath bring in Ronnie James Dio to replace Ozzy Osbourne for the seminal *Heaven And Hell* album; the New Wave Of British Heavy Metal take flight into international waters thanks to the debut albums from Iron Maiden and Def Leppard (self-titled and *On Through The Night*, respectively); and the release of the most important album that Motörhead have ever recorded, namely *Ace Of Spades*.



IRON MAIDEN

BLACK SABBATH
HEAVEN AND HELL

This was also the year when a racetrack in the Midlands became one of the famous locations in the world of rock and metal. Castle Donington may have had fans reaching for the nearest road map when it was announced that Rainbow would be playing an outdoor show at the site on August 16, 1980, but it soon became more famous for headbanging than for pit stops.

Joined by Judas Priest, the Scorpions, Saxon, April Wine, Riot and Touch, Blackmore and co. turned a rain-sodden, muddy field into a Mecca for metal, one that was to be an annual pilgrimage throughout the 1980s - the Monsters Of Rock Festival at Donington was to quickly establish itself as a world- renowned and revered event.

But this was merely the tip of an iceberg that arguably makes 1980 the most crucial year in the history of the music we all love.

In February of that year, EMI released the *Metal For Muthas* compilation, one that gave the whole NWOBHM concept a major-label cachet, featuring Maiden, plus Praying Mantis, Angel Witch, Sledgehammer, Nutz, not to mention the impossibly named Toad The Wet Sprocket and Ethel The Frog.

There was also the infamous Heavy Metal Barn Dance at Bingley Hall in Stafford, headlined by Motörhead, who led a merry metal jig with Saxon, Girlschoool, Vardis, Angel Witch and Mythra. How many fans ended up sleeping on Stafford station that night, having missed their last connection?

The Reading Festival filled our heads with rock - 1980 was when Slade staged one of the great comebacks of all time during the August Bank Holiday weekend. Former UFO guitar hero Michael Schenker cut his hair and started his own band, MSG. Rush also took a radical turn away from their sword & sorcery imagery, with the *Permanent Waves* album.

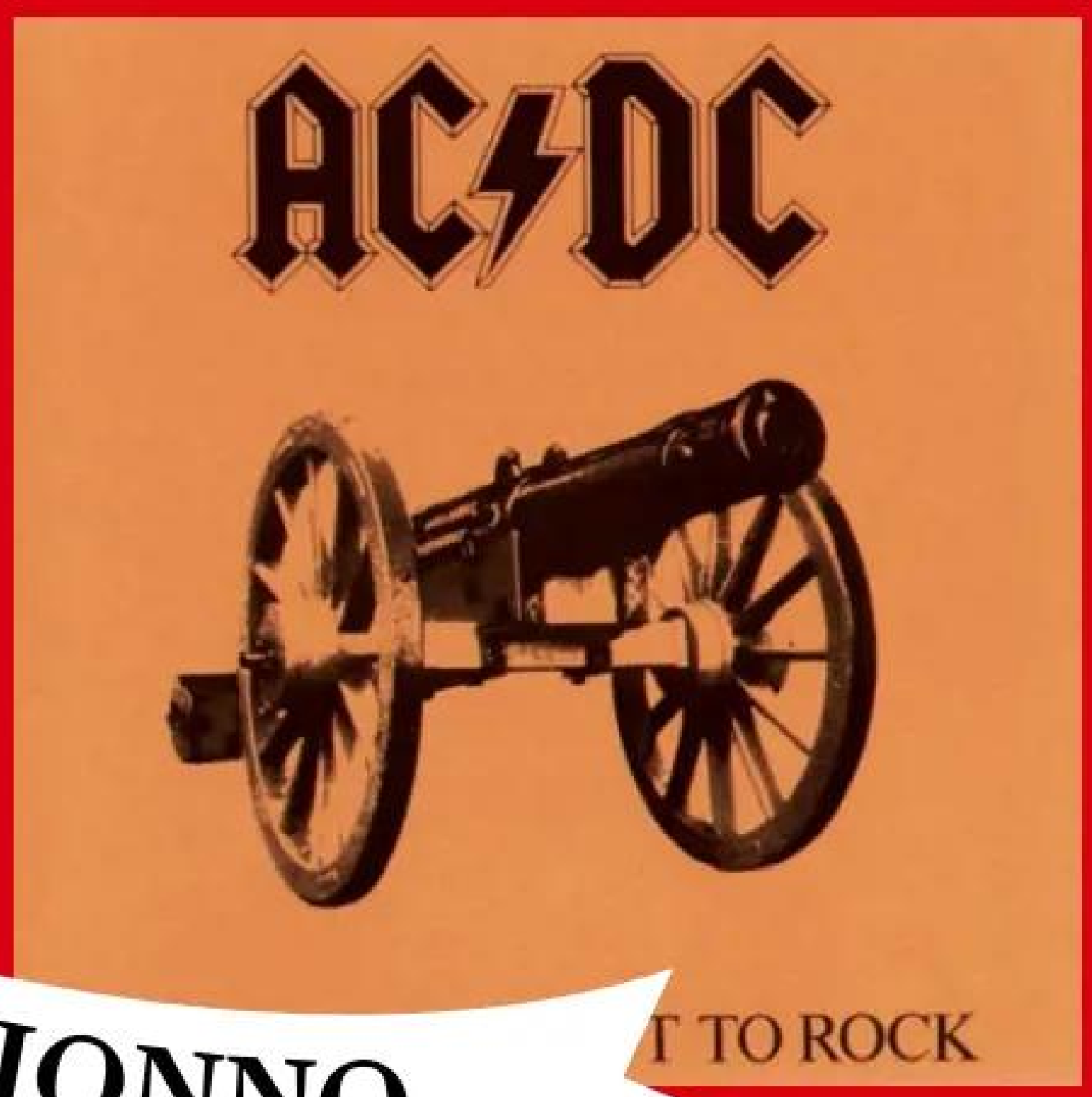
So much happened during these 12 months that, 25 years on, it's hard to pack the impact into mere words. But have no doubt what this year meant to the music scene. A young Danish wannabe was so fascinated by the UK melting pot that he spent a considerable amount of time over here, pursuing bands like Diamond Head and Jaguar. In fact he was so inspired by what was going on that the teenager determined to ditch his promising tennis career and try his hand with a drum stick.

We now know him as Lars Ulrich of Metallica. Just ask him how 1980 changed his life.

AC/DC THE FINAL SALUTE

FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

AC/DC
BACK IN BLACK



HELLO JONNO

BACK IN BLACK 1980

FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK WE SALUTE YOU 1981

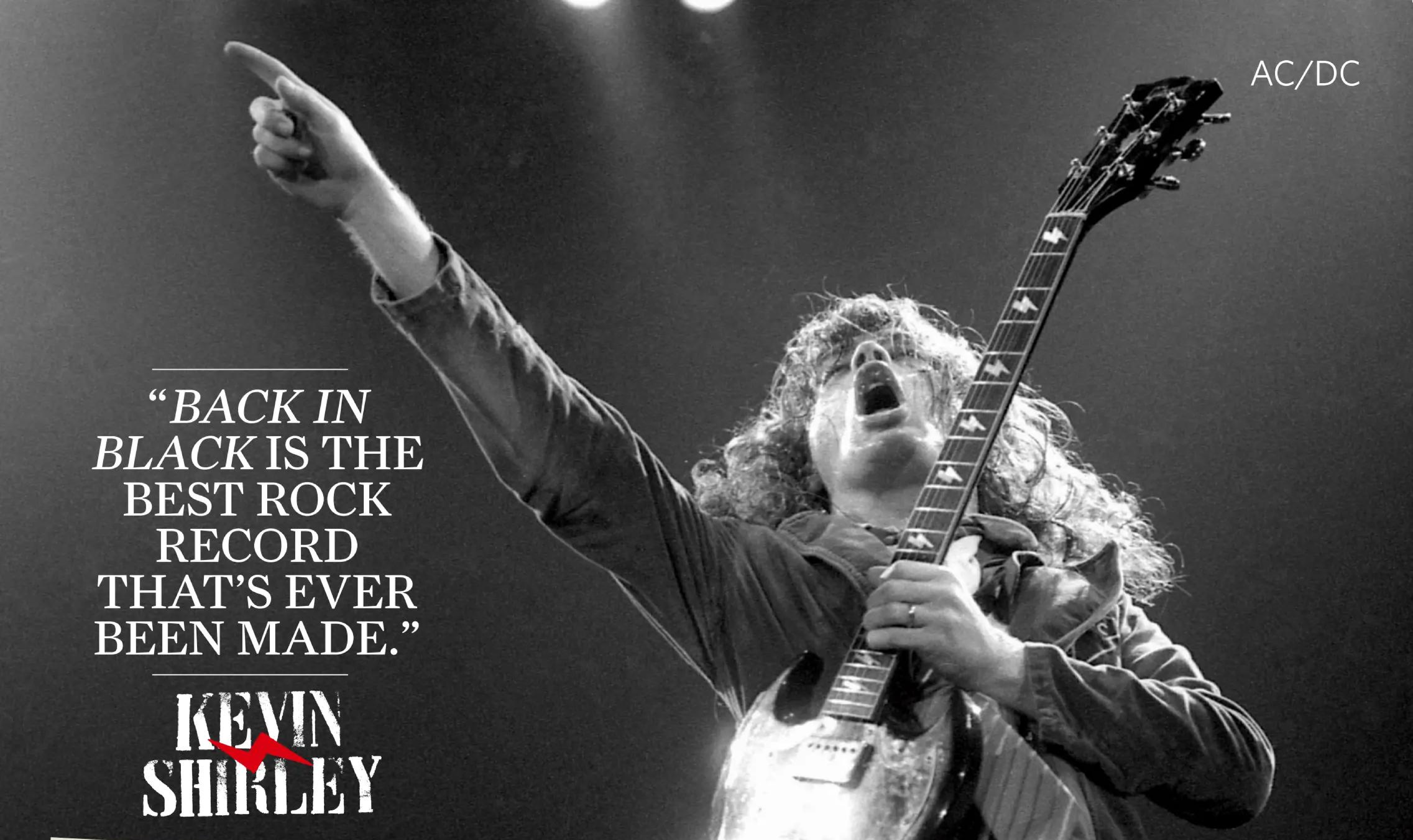
With Bon suddenly gone, few expected AC/DC to come back in such an explosive way with their next two albums.

Words: **Mick Wall**

At the end of the day, it's not the how or the why that made *Back In Black* such a monumental release, but the what. Or in this case, the 'what the fuck'? That's to say, it's not the tortuous story behind its making, but the sound of it, the sheer scale of it, that makes *Black In Black* what it is. From the moment that tolling bell that opens side one begins to chime ominously, followed, on the fifth chime, by that body-being-dragged-from-the-river guitar, all the way across dark thunderclouds to the very end of the album, when Brian Johnson announces that rock'n'roll is *'just rock'n'roll'* and the guitars and drums stub themselves out like a chewed-up cigarette. That feeling, that fuck-you blam-blam-blam.

Most of it is down to the production by Mutt Lange. Having already taken AC/DC's bruised blues-and-rock street vibe and sculpted it into the arena-filling, radio-friendly *Highway To Hell*, Mutt went one notch higher – not to 11, but to infinity.

As Mutt's fellow South African Kevin Shirley – who, as producer for such mega-acts as Zeppelin, Maiden and Aerosmith, would know – says of *Back In Black*: "It's my all-time favourite album, next to Miles Davis and maybe a Beethoven violin concerto. It's certainly the best rock record that's ever been made. There's just an incredible architecture to it. It's the benchmark record for



“*BACK IN BLACK* IS THE BEST ROCK RECORD THAT’S EVER BEEN MADE.”

KEVIN SHIRLEY

ATLANTIC RECORDS
WELCOMES
AC/DC
“BACK IN PLATINUM”
TO NEW YORK CITY

AC/DC
HELLS BELLS

Jonno rings in the changes.

3 X ROSS HALFIN

sound. The production on that record is so melodic, it just sounds so good. And it’s so well structured that it crosses the genres.”

With its cathedral-like production, its high-quality songs that still contained enough of Bon Scott’s DNA to afford them true greatness, and, most reassuring of all, with a new singer who had clearly taken to his task with the kind of relish Bon would surely have applauded, *Back In Black* was a better album than even the impossible-to-please Young brothers could have imagined. So resoundingly defiant of the bleak circumstances of its bloodied origins, it soon took on a life of its own, beyond the hopes and aspirations of the band or even their fans, and out there in the stratosphere where only the truly great rock giants lived.

Like all the best AC/DC moments, the key to their success is all in the grooves. So that even ostensibly bleak tracks like *Hells Bells* sound like a party you don’t want to leave. “It’s a lesson we learned in Def Leppard when we worked with Mutt,” says Joe Elliott. “A track doesn’t have to be fast to feel like it’s really rocking. AC/DC were masters of that on *Back In Black*.”

Same thing with the title track, which slithers like a snake yet hits like a speeding train; a sonic serpentine made even harder to resist because of the lyrics. Written, as was *Hell’s Bells*, with Bon in mind, Jonno, as he became known, would never sound so serious, so heartfelt or inspired, again.

Elsewhere, on other cornerstone moments like *Given The Dog A Bone* and *Let Me Put My Love Into You*, he showed he also had a penchant for double-entendre lyrics that almost matched Bon’s.

And then there was the voice. While there is little that is new about the music on *BIB*, save its next-level refinement, Jonno’s voice was a revelation. He may have looked like a cross between Albert Steptoe and Andy Capp, with his gamekeeper tweed cap and endless smoky tabs, but he had a voice like the sound of a giant who was gargling with nails, and a presence as warm and inviting as a pub fire.

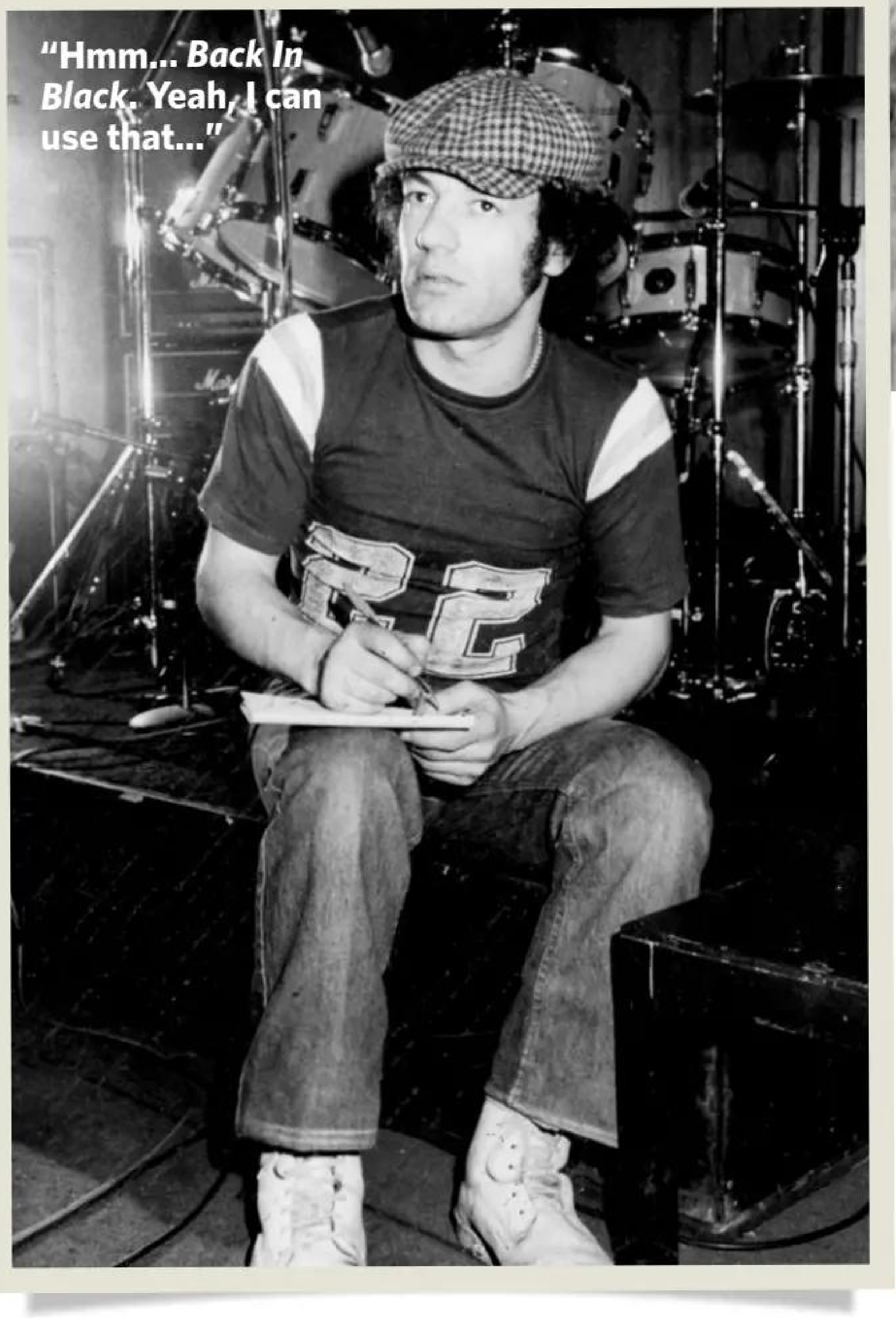
According to the singer, however, there was a further presence involved in the music. Recalling how he wrote the lyrics to *You Shook Me All Night Long*, he said: “Something washed through me – this kind of calm. I’d like to think it was Bon, but I can’t because I’m too cynical and I don’t want people getting carried away. But something happened and I just started writing the song.”

Mutt’s engineer, Tony Platt, recalls the whole band coming up with lyric ideas too. “I can distinctly remember on *You Shook Me* everybody sitting down just throwing ideas forward. *‘Double time on the seduction line’* was one of mine. I’ll always lay claim to that one.” Some of the suggestions by the band were “too lewd and over the top”, others were “just too stupid”. *What Do You Do For The Money Honey* dated back, Malcolm said, to the original *Powerage* sessions three years before. George Young had come up with the title, and “we all chipped in” on the lyrics.

Later, the rumour spread that Bon had been the author of many of the lyrics. But while the band’s tour manager at the time, Ian Jeffery, recalls that “some scraps of paper with maybe a few words on them” had been recovered from the singer’s flat after his death, contrary to the conspiracy theorists’ claims there were no song titles, no completed verses, very little to go on, just his spirit.

Indeed, some of the tracks just seemed to appear out of thin air. Tony Platt says one of the ▷

With *Back In Black* AC/DC created a monster.



"Hmm... *Back In Black*. Yeah, I can use that..."

easiest tracks to record was the straight-ahead rocker *Shoot To Thrill*. Almost one take. For Jonno it was the monolithic closer, *Rock And Roll Ain't Noise Pollution*. "I didn't know what to do at the start so you can hear me there having a fag. Mal just said to go with it, so I put my headphones on, put a tab in my mouth and just took a breath: '*All you middlemen throw away your fancy cars*…' For some reason middlemen were in the news at the time. The top guys weren't getting the blame and the work force weren't getting it either, it was the middlemen who were this grey area. I must have picked up on it and it just went from there."

Recorded in the Bahamas and completed in just six weeks, *Back In Black*, released just months after Bon's death, would become what many still consider to be the greatest AC/DC album of all. It was certainly their biggest hit, with more than 40 million sales worldwide making it the biggest-selling rock album of all time.

The question now was: how do you follow that?

The answer was not one they would find easy to come by. In fact they didn't even come close with the follow-up, *For Those About To Rock… We Salute You*, recorded at different studios in Paris, in the summer of 1981, again with Lange at the controls. While AC/DC arguably owed everything to Lange's meticulous, almost OCD approach to record production, there was no denying the tensions his unusual methods were creating within the band.

As Mutt would later concede: "Some of them believe I was a merciless tyrant in the studio and obsessed with absolute perfection with each song." Asked to describe a typical day in the studio in Paris, Johnson chuckled ruefully: "Angus, Malcolm and myself on a big sofa – waiting!" Or as Angus put it: "Just some guys that were bored shitless."

It was that boredom that eventually translated onto the grooves of *FTATR*. Tension reigned throughout the recording. So while the brilliantly apocalyptic title song would become one of their greatest anthems, most of the rest of the songs most decidedly would not.

Starting as usual with a chorus and riff concocted by Malcolm and Angus, Johnson's lyrical theme for the title track was supplied by a book Angus had come across about Roman gladiators titled *For Those About To Die We Salute You*, taken from the oath each gladiator would address the emperor with as they went into battle: 'Ave Caesar morituri te salutant' ('Hail Caesar, we who are about to die salute you.') "We thought: 'For those about to rock'… I mean, it sounds a bit better than 'for those about to die'," Angus said:

A 'journey' song, in that it starts relatively slow before moving through the gears towards a tremendous all-guitars-and-drums-blazing finale, its other signature motif was the sound effect of cannons blasting off as a prelude to its scorching climax – inspired by the cannons fired at the wedding that summer of Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles. The band had been rehearsing the song when Angus noticed "the royal wedding thing" on the TV. At which point a lightbulb went on in his head. "I just wanted something strong," he recalled. "Something masculine, and rock'n'roll. And what's more masculine than a cannon, you know? I mean, it gets loaded, it fires, and it destroys."

Unlike on *BIB*, almost all of the material had been written in advance. It should have been a case of simply going into the studio and bashing the songs out. But that wasn't how Mutt worked. The results fell between two stools. On tracks like *I Put The Finger On You*, *Let's Get It Up* and *Snowballed*, the lyrics had descended from double- to single-entendre, and the riffs were now being scooped from the bottom of the barrel – something that could never have been said of even their most mediocre Bon-era tracks.

With a band this all-conquering and a producer this brilliant, the overall effect could be powerfully felt when played at top volume. But there was little to keep bringing you back. Tracks like *Inject The Venom* and *Night Of The Long Knives* were parodic. The single-line choruses and pedestrian riffs were becoming – yawn – predictable.

There were better tracks – the groovacious *Evil Walks*, the swaggering *C.O.D.* – but these were exceptions. Some, like *Breaking The Rules*, started out sounding momentous then descended from their tremble-tremble intros into half-arsed rock-by-numbers affairs. Even the final track, the self-consciously climactic *Spellbound*, failed to live up to its billing. The production, once so awe-inspiring, sounded cumbersome, a whole lotta love wasted on thin material unworthy of the producer's ardour.

"By the time we'd completed the album," Malcolm Young later reflected, "I don't think anyone, neither the band nor the producer, could tell whether it sounded right or wrong. Everyone was fed up with the whole album."

With the recording finally wrapped at the end of September, Atlantic hurried to get the album out in time for Christmas. Released in the UK on November 23, 1981, *For Those About To Rock* was largely greeted with joy by fans and critics still basking in the heat of its mega-hit predecessor. It did not, however, follow *Back in Black* to No.1; it peaked at No.3 behind the Human League's *Dare* and Queen's first *Greatest Hits*. And while it provided the band with their first US No.1 album, sales were a fraction of what they had been for *Back In Black*.

> "SOME SAY I WAS A TYRANT IN THE STUDIO."
>
> **MUTT LANGE**

2 X PHOTOSHOT

☆ EVERY HOME SHOULD HAVE ONE ☆

ALBUMS YOU SHOULD OWN

GETTY

AC/DC
BACK IN BLACK

Album
Back In Black
Artist
AC/DC
First released
August 1980
Line-up
Brian Johnson
Vocals
Angus Young
Lead guitar
Malcolm Young
Rhythm guitar
Cliff Williams
Bass
Phil Rudd
Drums
Original Highest chart Position
UK 1, US 4
Get it
Remastered and Reissued in 2003 on epic records

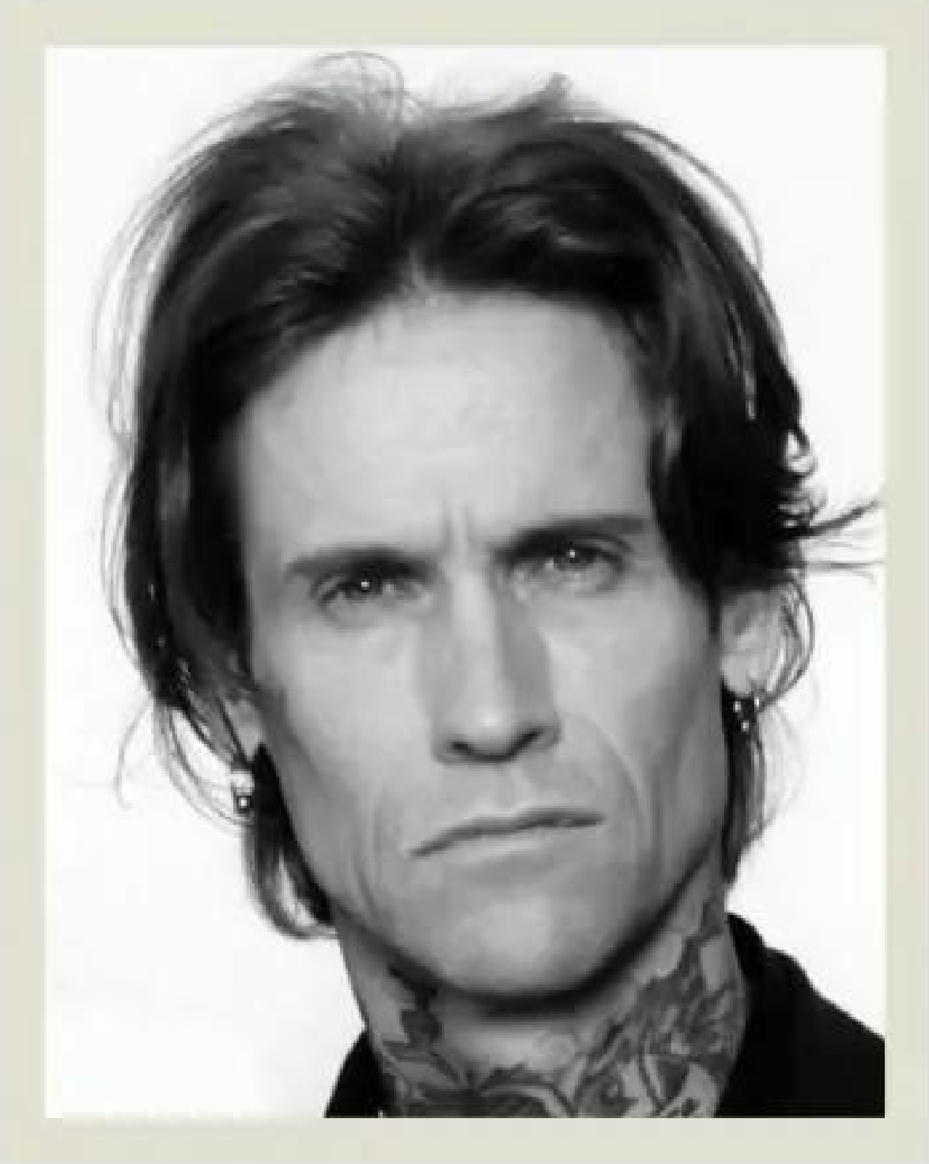
★AC/DC

BACK IN BLACK

Back with a reunited Buckcherry, singer Josh Todd recalls how AC/DC got him all lit up during his pizza delivery days.

INTERVIEW: **DAVID GLESSNER**

“Back In Black was so important to me because it was one of those records that defined a moment in my life when music had the most influence over me. I just remember being 16 or 17 years old and getting that record. It just fit every aspect of my lifestyle at the time. I would fuck to it, party to it and skateboard to it.



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I remember I was so into that record I used to keep it on me at all times just to turn people on to it. “I was delivering pizza, and my manager was a big metalhead. He turned me on to it. And later I saw some video footage and I thought Angus Youngwas the coming of the Antichrist. He was like something out of a cartoon. I was hooked, and at that point had to get my hands on every AC/DC record there was. That, of course, turned me on to one of my all-time favourite singers, Bon Scott.

> **“I would fuck to it, party to it and skateboard to it.”**

“The song that stands out the most to me is You Shook Me All Night Long. I love the opening riff, and the song highlights the female in all her glory. It rocks and it makes me want to drink and fuck. When you can write a song that brings that out in people, you’ve really got something. That’s why it’s one of the topselling rock’n’roll records of all time. “The album cover was just the way I like it, too: black and simple. And with a logo like AC/DC’s you don’t really need much more on the cover. I thought it was a statement and it was mysterious. You really wanted to know what was inside.

“I love most all the AC/DC records, but nothing compares to the timing and delivery of Back In Black. That only happens once in a great while with really great bands.

“At the time, I think the only other rock records I was listening to were Led Zeppelin’s Houses Of The Holy and I think Metallica’s Kill ’Em All. The rest of my albums were my punk rock records that included Minor Threat, The Toy Dolls and Black Flag. “Back In Black was just such a timeless record that it never failed to fit the mood, so it got most of my attention at the time.

“I didn’t get to see them on tour. At that point I could only scrape up enough money to go see punk rock shows at Fender’s Ballroom in Long Beach [California]. But I got to open up for them four times with Buckcherry, and that has been, to date, the best rock’n’roll experience of my life.”

Take Aim…

Coming off the back of what would become the second-best-selling album of all time, the pressure was on **AC/DC** to provide a world-beating follow-up. But the cracks were beginning to show in the family business.

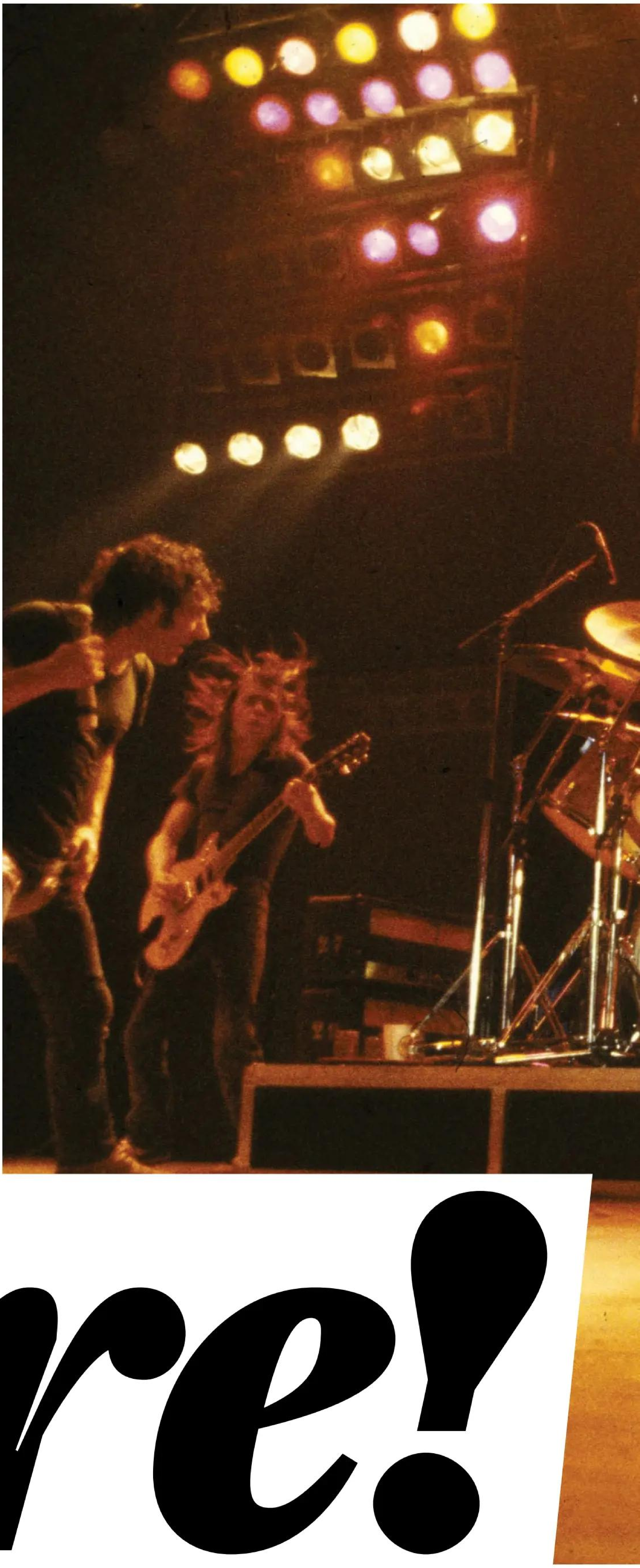
Words: **Mick Wall**

As the razzed-up 1980s arrived like a drunken gatecrasher at the ebbing party that was once the 1970s, the face of rock was changing. It was no longer embodied by the svelte, golden god, tousled mane framing a coquettish pout as he stood astride his mic stand. Nor was it the lead guitarist, swaying like a cobra, hypnotised by his own wasted elegance. Instead, by the summer of 1981 the biggest noise in rock was being made by a 26-year-old man dressed as a schoolboy, complete with bad haircut, skew-whiff cap, and guitar turned to 11, sitting on the shoulders of a screw-faced, flat-capped singer with a voice that sounded like a giant gargling with nails.

Goodbye Led Zeppelin, their break-up confirmed the previous year. Hello AC/DC, whose latest album, *Back In Black,* had reached No.1 in Britain and sold more than five million copies in the US. It was an album with an appeal so broad that it would go on to become the second-biggest-selling of all time (after Michael Jackson's *Thriller*).

Not that this was a story of overnight success. *Back In Black* was the seventh album AC/DC had released in six years. Moreover, it was an album that had been made in the aftermath of the drink-related death of singer Bon Scott, the irrepressible frontman who'd helped the band claw their way up from the bush-league of the Australian pub circuit to the theatres and halls of the UK and Europe, and now finally into the arenas of the beckoning world.

Against all odds, AC/DC had not only survived the hole beneath the waterline that Scott's death represented, they had also positively thrived. With Scott's replacement, Brian Johnson, on board, *Back In Black* had succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams.



MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Fire!

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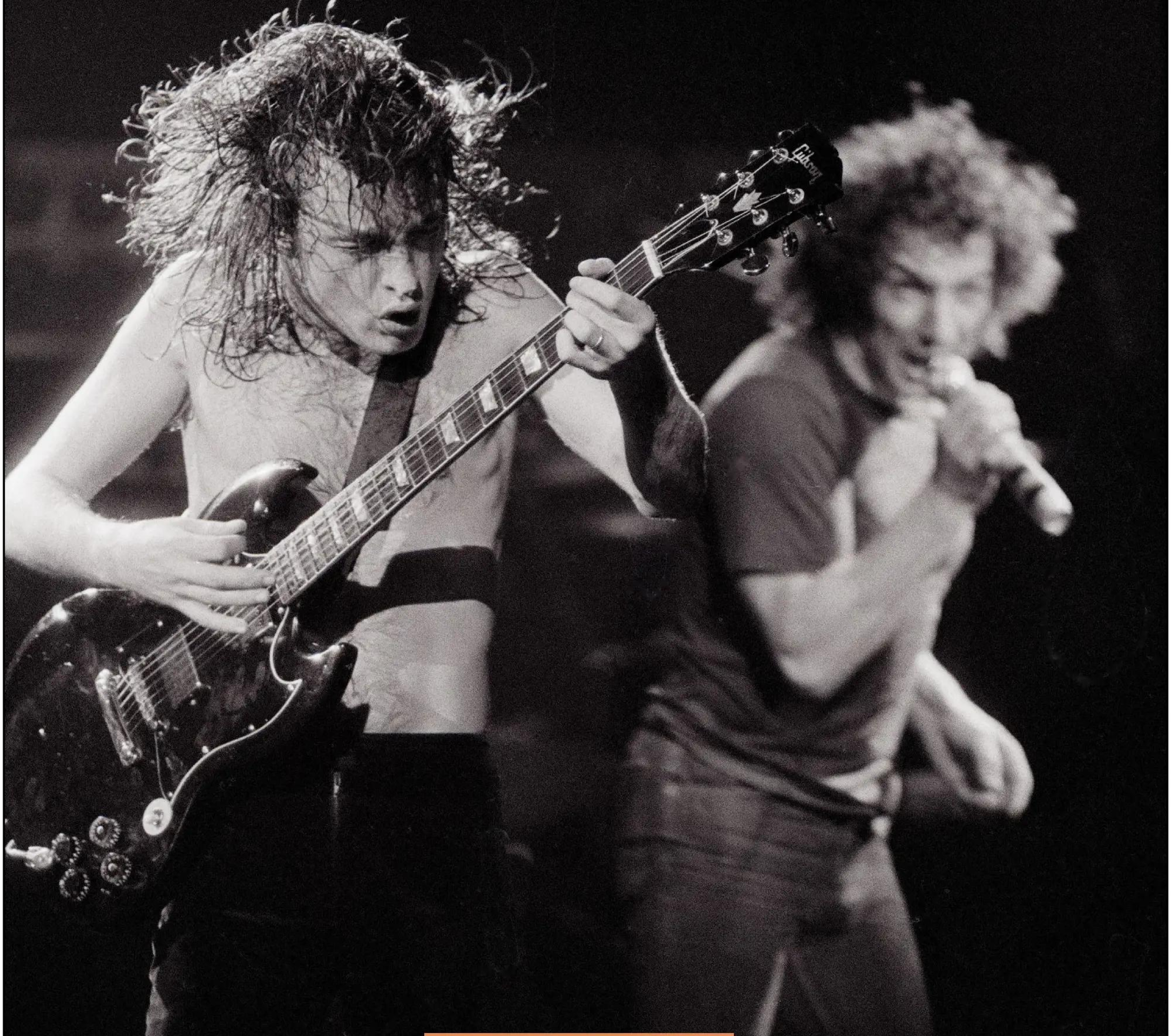

Angus and Brian: the most unlikely rock'n'roll double-team of all time.

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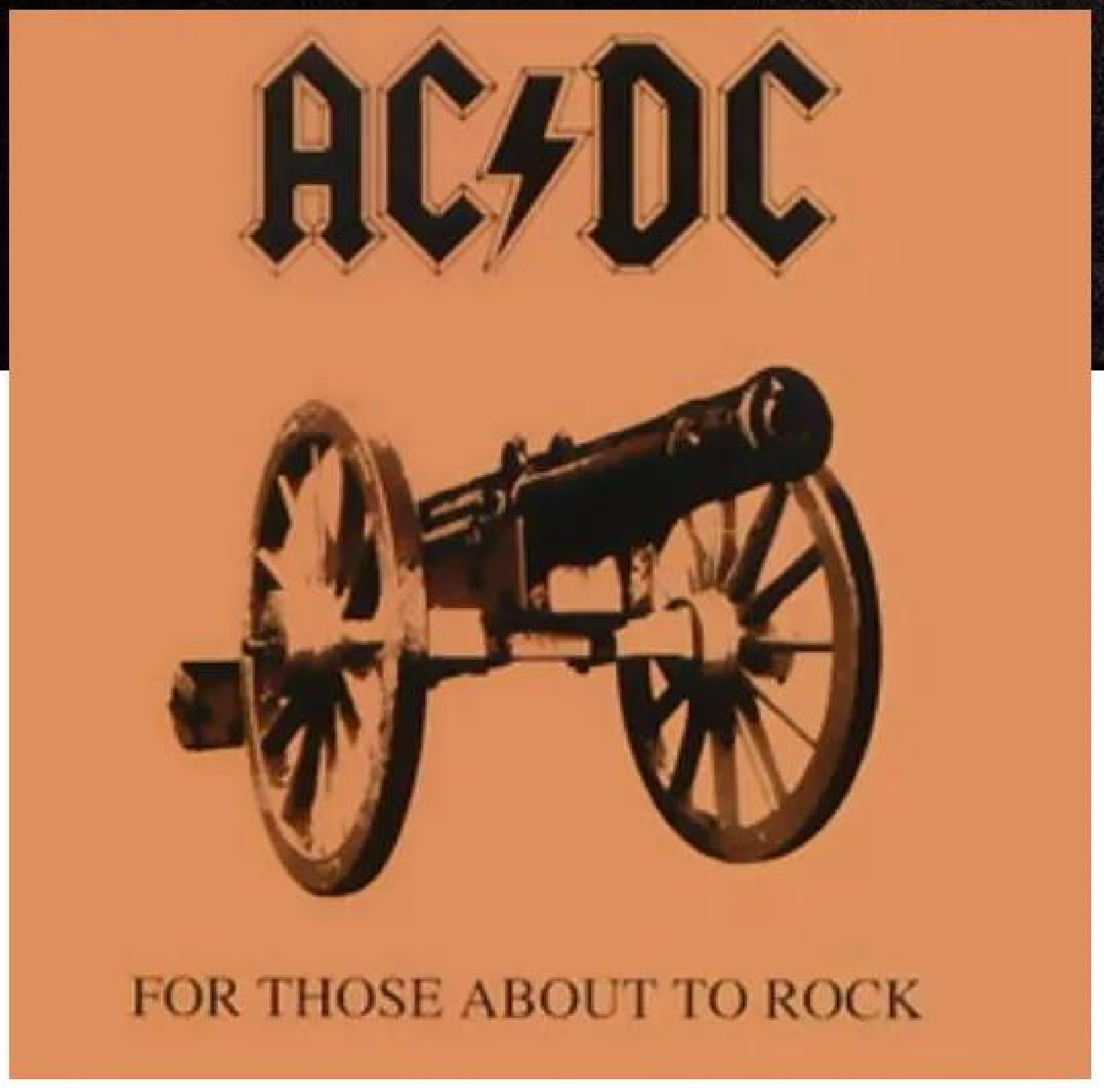


"We knew that this new line-up would work, and that we wouldn't have to worry about the past any more," guitarist and co-founder Angus Young tells *Classic Rock* today. "We had found success with a new voice, and that was a big relief."

Whether they consciously realised it or not, that success would change AC/DC. If the story of *Back In Black* was one of triumph emerging from tragedy, then that of its follow-up would be one of missed opportunities, ill-fated decisions, and the ultimate consolidation of the truth at the heart of AC/DC: that this was as much a family business as a band, and they didn't need anybody outside of that family to tell them what to do or how to do it.

It didn't start out that way. When the five members of AC/DC – Angus Young and his elder brother, rhythm guitarist and de facto leader Malcolm, plus bassist Cliff Williams, drummer Phil Rudd and new-kid vocalist Brian Johnson – arrived in Paris in the early summer of 1981 to start recording the follow-up to *Back In Black*, the building blocks for yet more success were solidly in place. Not only had they managed the seemingly impossible in replacing Scott with Johnson, a 33-year-old journeyman whose only previous brush with success was a sole Top 10 hit with his former band Geordie seven years earlier, but also they had the ultimate team in their corner: top management in the shape of Leber-Krebs, who also handled Aerosmith and Ted Nugent; Atlantic Records, the world's biggest label; and, most importantly, producer Mutt Lange, the man who had played such an important part in their rise. They even had a title for the new album that rang out as both a call to arms and a tribute to the fans who had elevated them to their current position: *For Those About To Rock We Salute You*. What could possibly go wrong?

"Of course, the label wanted it to sell just like *Back In Black* did, but we knew damn well that's not going to happen cos you can't do that," Brian Johnson says today. "You can't write songs with the intention to sell a million singles or albums. We never felt any outside pressure, because we didn't let it in. We were very confident after the success of *Back In Black*. And we had every right to be."

That's not how everyone in the AC/DC camp remembers it, however. Ian Jeffery was the band's tour manager at the time. He had been with them since they'd arrived in the UK in 1976 and was an integral part of the set-up. "We didn't know it yet, but the really hard part had only just begun," he says of the post-*Back In Black* period. "Everything was going great until Atlantic stepped in and fucked it up."

Atlantic Records was one of music's great powerhouses. Founded in 1947 by Turkish-born mogul Ahmet Ertegun, it made its name with R&B, jazz and soul before branching out into rock in the 70s, most notably with Led Zeppelin. The label had picked up AC/DC in 1976, though the feeling in the US office was that the band had little chance of making headway there. Hence the nudge they gave them towards ditching their original manager, Michael Browning, and switching in 1978 to more experienced handlers, in the shape

> **"THEY WANTED IT TO SELL LIKE *BACK IN BLACK*. THAT WASN'T GOING TO HAPPEN."**
>
> **BRIAN JOHNSON**

of Leber-Krebs and the day-to-day attentions of an up-and-coming young firebrand from New York named Peter Mensch. Hence also the decision to oust George Young – elder brother of Malcolm and Angus – and his partner Harry Vanda from the production hot-seats they had occupied from the very beginning and bring in producer-of-the-moment Mutt Lange, with the specific brief to produce an album that US radio would actually play (a feat he achieved in with 1979's Bon Scott swansong *Highway To Hell*).

None of these decisions had been popular with the band, but they had gone along with them because they had no choice. "It was one of the only times they ever played the game," says Jeffery. "The only other time was when Atlantic told them to go home to Australia and write a hit, and they came back with *Rock And Roll Damnation*, all hand-claps and maracas – and still not a hit."

By the end of 1980, Atlantic had installed a new president, the hard-nosed Doug Morris. In Morris's eyes, the success of *Back In Black* was a flash-in-the-pan. Rather than wait for a proper follow-up, he decided to make hay while the sun shone by releasing *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* – an album that had been released everywhere but the US five years before.

Phil Carson was the head of Atlantic everywhere outside America, and the man who had signed AC/DC to the label. "I said to Morris: 'How are you ever going to consider releasing a Bon Scott album after we've just broken our balls introducing the public to Brian Johnson? I think you're crazy!'" states Carson today. "There's absolutely no doubt in my mind, if they'd waited for the next Johnson album it would have been an even bigger album. This was one of the worst money-driven decisions ever made by a label executive."

Dirty Deeds… reached No.3 in the US, one place higher than *Back In Black*'s peak, but it sold only two million copies there at a time when *Back In Black* was now topping 10 million. The upshot, says Carson, was that the sales plateau for all subsequent AC/DC album releases in America would be similarly downsized. Not for the first time in history, short-term record company greed had stymied long-term artist career growth.

To their fury, the band didn't have the power to stop the release, though they did their best to cover their record company's tracks, claiming it was essentially to counter US bootlegs of the album. "There were thousands of pirate tapes, shit-poor quality and expensive," Johnson told *Creem* magazine. "So rather they [the band] get the money." When the album went Top 10, he added, without a trace of apparent irony: "I was more fucking chuffed about it than the rest of the band were."

More chuffed than Malcolm and Angus Young. The brothers may have been slight in stature, but they more than compensated for their lack of physical presence with sheer force of personality – particularly the elder Malcolm, who had started the band as a teenager. "They would discuss things between them, but Malcolm was the decision maker," recalls Ian Jeffery. "Even if Angus had strong points, Malcolm would be: 'Fuck off, mate, we're not doing that.'"

Even when Bon had been in the band, it had always been led by the brothers. "Bon was his own man, but the band belonged to Malcolm," says Jeffery. "It was Malcolm who told Phil Rudd to stick to the beat; Malcolm who told Cliff where to stand and when to come to the mic. When Brian joined, it was Malcolm that told him to shut the fuck up between songs and just stand there and sing. It would always be Malcolm, every direction or turning they took."

And they were about to take some that would affect their whole career.

On Monday July 6, 1981 AC/DC turned up at EMI's Pathé Marconi studios in Paris to start work on the all-important follow-up to *Back In Black*. Having come off the road at the end of 1980 richer than they ever had been before, the five band members had enjoyed the first extended break of their career: Angus by settling down to married life in Holland; Malcolm and Phil Rudd, similarly, in London and Sydney respectively; Cliff Williams, meanwhile, had bought himself a "rock star hidey-hole" in Hawaii, where he had been joined, briefly, by Johnson,

LIVE: NEIL ZLOZOWER

The schoolboy superstar in full flight. None more rock.

Big balls? Not if Angus isn't careful with that axe.

CLAYTON CALL/GETTY

"AC/DC BELONGED TO MALCOLM. HE TOLD BRIAN TO SHUT THE FUCK UP AND SING." IAN JEFFERY

en route to buying his own new home in Florida. But when they assembled in the studio, no one was particularly happy. Their mood wasn't helped by the fact they had spent the previous week rehearsing at the Arabella apartments in the Montmartre – "which they all hated," according to Ian Jeffery. It all was certainly a long way from Compass Point studio in Nassau, the Bahamas, where they had recorded *Back In Black*.

One familiar presence in the Paris studio was producer Mutt Lange, who had overseen both *Highway To Hell* and *Back In Black*. A multi-instrumentalist and songwriter from South Africa, Lange was a perfectionist who didn't understand the concept of getting it right on the night. His penchant for repeated takes would reach its apotheosis with Def Leppard's *Hysteria*, which took nearly two years of studio work to complete. Lange's meticulous, borderline OCD approach to record production helped take AC/DC to the next level of success, but his methods were creating tensions with the band.

As always, the first point of order for Lange was capturing the drum sound, which he would use as the foundation stone upon which to build the rest of the album. Immediately there was a problem – and not just with the drums.

AC/DC were a band built on spontaneity. Graham 'Buzz' Bidstrup, former drummer with Australian hotshots The Angels, who toured with AC/DC in the early days and worked in the same studio with George Young, recalls how "when they recorded back then they just did it like playing a gig. Bon would be grinning and giving it loads, drinking and sweating, and Angus would be flying all over the studio, rolling round on his back." With Lange in charge, the studio was a very different place.

Mark Dearnley was Lange's engineer on the Paris sessions. He had first worked with the producer and the band on *Highway To Hell*. "Mutt has a picture of the way he wants to hear it in his head, and will keep on bashing away until we hit that particular note that he has," says Dearnley today. "And sometimes it can take some time. They spent the first three days in Paris just on the snare drum sound. It got to the point where at the end of day two Mutt said: 'What do you think of that?' I said: 'I haven't got a clue!'"

In the end it took nearly 10 days for Lange to decide he was never going to find the sound he wanted, and call a halt to the sessions. Another studio was hastily found. They spent the next two weeks trying out a number of different studios for a day or two each, before Lange decided that it all sounded better in the initial rehearsal room – a cold, stone room at Quai De Bercy, to where the producer ordered in the Mobile One portable recording studio from London.

The delays were starting to eat away at the band. Angus says that "probably most, if not all" the songs had been written long before they got to the studio. "We are always well prepared," he says. "We go in the studio with complete songs and we know what we want. We don't fuck around much. Unlike Mutt Lange. But that guy has always been slow – real slow. He'd need forever to get anything done. Otherwise it would have been in and out in a week, I'd say."

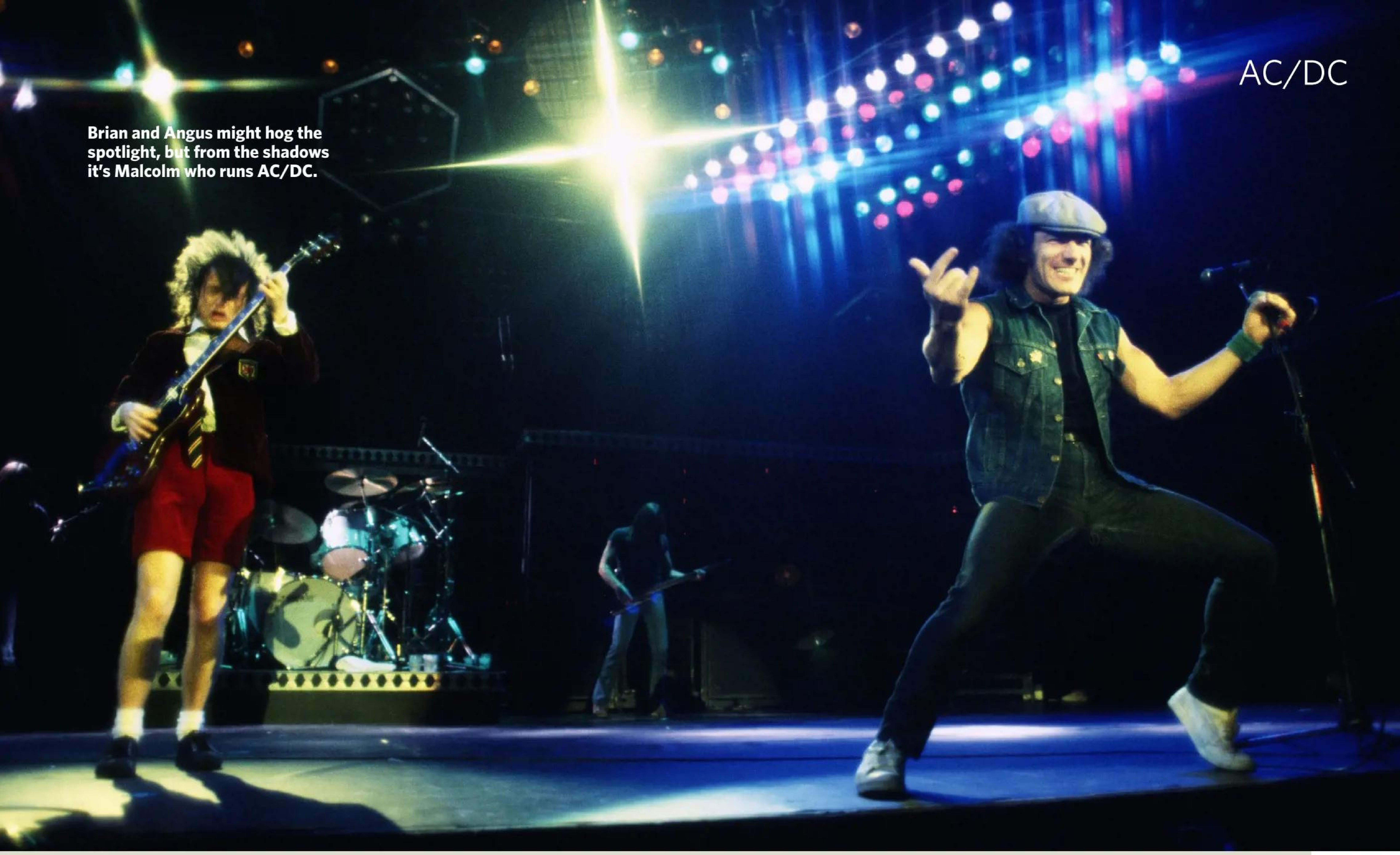
Anyone dropping in the studio while AC/DC were recording wouldn't have seen anything untoward. Johnson and the Young brothers spent much of their time perched on a large sofa, waiting for Lange to finish tinkering. "Bored shitless," Angus says succinctly. Malcolm was even less impressed, pissed off at what he saw as the producer's "fannying around".

Lange was also now questioning every aspect of the band's operation, according to Jeffery. Added to his personal hit-list, where Atlantic and Lange were now vying for the top spot, was the band's management.

"[The band] felt that they were being compromised," says Jeffery. "Stuck out in Paris they felt isolated. They were struggling with the record, to start with. They were starting to get into contentious situations with Mutt. It wasn't flowing in the studio. They weren't writing like they were used to. That whole side of things wasn't happening."

By now it was the first week of August – just two weeks before AC/DC's first live show for nearly a year: headlining the Monsters Of Rock festival at Castle Donington. Although the date had been booked months before, this was not how the band saw themselves preparing for what would be their biggest ever show in the UK. "We were shitting ourselves," recalls Johnson. "'Fuck, we haven't played this! We

ROSS HALFIN



Brian and Angus might hog the spotlight, but from the shadows it's Malcolm who runs AC/DC.

"FILTH! PURE FILTH!"

In 1981, *Sounds* journalist Laura Canyon got a track-by-track rundown of *For Those About To Rock We Salute You* from Angus Young and Brian Johnson. This is what they had to say.

FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK (WE SALUTE YOU)

Angus: "We had this chorus riff and we thought: 'Well, this sounds rather deadly.' And we were trying to find a good title. And there's this book from years ago about the Roman gladiators called *For Those About To Die We Salute You*. So we thought: 'For those about to rock.' I mean, it sounds a bit better than 'For those about to die'. The song's got a lot of meaning to it. It's a very inspiring song. It makes you feel a bit powerful. And I think that's what rock'n'roll's all about."

I PUT THE FINGER ON YOU

Angus: "That's basically a gangster line like they do in the movies [does a silly Humphrey Bogart impersonation]. We're not putting the finger on anyone in particular. It's always been the other fucking way around."

LET'S GET IT UP

Brian: "Filth, pure filth! We're a filthy band."
Angus: "You can take it one of two ways. Let's get it up, meaning musically up, or… We've been called that word 'macho'. That's not even in my fucking dictionary. What does it mean? We're not 'macho'. We don't even think like that. It was just a line that sprang to mind. And it sounded better than *Let's Get It Down*."

INJECT THE VENOM

Angus: "That's a power thing like *For Those About To Rock*. It just means have it hot."
Brian: "There's one line that says: '*If you inject the venom it will be your last attack*'. Which is like a snake – once it bites you it's got nothing left."

SHUTTERSTOCK

Angus: "Do it once. Do it hard and good or you're finished. It's a real rock'n'roll line."

SNOWBALLED

Angus: "Meaning you've been conned, fooled again. And we figured we'd been tricked enough in our time, so we came out with that. It could be the woman you're paying alimony to, anything."

EVIL WALKS

Angus: "As the name says, evil walks. It's everywhere. Actually it's just a catchy title with a catchy tune. We were playing it at the beginning and I said: 'Those chords sound dead evil.' And that's usually how we do it – just sitting around and nattering and thinking and jamming away, and someone says something and that's it."

C.O.D

Angus: "Most people think C.O.D. means cash on delivery. I was sitting around trying to come up with a better one and I came up with *Care Of The Devil*. We're not black-magic Satanists or whatever you call it. I don't drink blood. I may wear black underwear now and again but that's it."

BREAKING THE RULES

Angus: "It's like when somebody says: 'You can't do that' at school or whatever. You do it anyhow."
Brian: "But at the same time it says don't start any fooking revolutions, don't be a big fooking hero, just break the rules in your own way. Don't just do what the man says and go: 'Aye, okay,' do it the way you wanted to."
Angus: "Which is what we did."

NIGHT OF THE LONG KNIVES

Angus: "It's like a horror movie. Another power thing. It just sounded nice."

SPELLBOUND

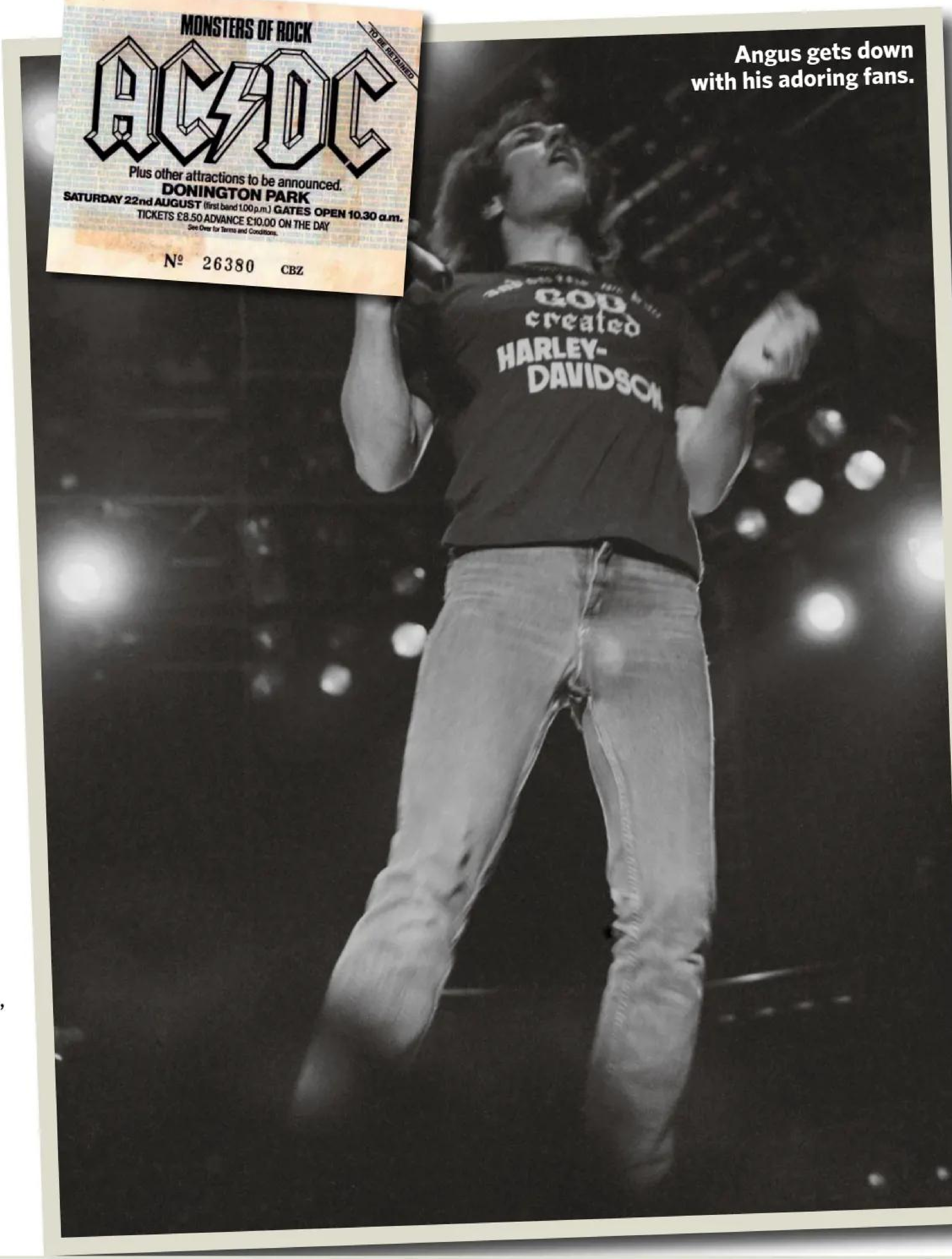
Angus: "The God-botherers have been bothering us for years. Some crud just sent me a letter – addressed to Bon too – sending us these stupid things. Some people are sick. If they want to go God-bothering they should go God-bother the Pope. He needs it. We don't."
Brian: "All they want to do is make a little bit of attention for themselves. What was that one we had in Detroit just now? 'The Bible says the word of the Devil is evil and so is rock'n'roll'. The fucking Bible says rock'n'roll music is evil? I don't remember the Bible mentioning rock'n'roll."
Angus: "There are a lot of people who genuinely believe in it and that's all right. It's up to them. But I don't really like people coming bothering me. I had one idiot trying to blast away in my earhole. He started with: 'Do you believe in God?' I said: 'I've no interest in it so leave me alone.'"

haven't rehearsed anything!'"

Their fears weren't unfounded. Remembered now as one of those dreary, rainy days that disfigure so many outdoor British festivals, Donington 1981 also suffered from poor live sound and an under-par performance from the headliners, who relied on the same set they'd been playing on tour the previous year. Though the 65,000 fans there that day seemed appreciative enough, the band knew they had badly undersold themselves.

"It was just one of those days," says Jeffery. "The BBC did something that buggered up the sound that we were getting blamed for. It rained and the band wasn't really ready for it, even though the date had been in the diary for a long time before. It just sort of added to all the other things that were going wrong in Paris."

Adding insult to injury, Malcolm had been stopped going up the ramp to the stage by a security guard for not having the correct stage pass.



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Angus gets down with his adoring fans.

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Returning to Paris the next day the band, Malcolm in particular was in vengeful mood. Somebody would have to pay. And that someone would be Peter Mensch. A former tour accountant for Aerosmith, Mensch had been appointed AC/DC's key man after impressing them on their first US tour with Leber-Krebs at the helm, in 1979. Mensch had dutifully relocated to London to be near the band, who were all now living there. "For the next two years Peter was their man every day – every day," says Jeffery. "Hands on, totally."

"WE DON'T FK AROUND MUCH. UNLIKE MUTT LANGE. THAT GUY IS SLOW – REAL SLOW." ANGUS YOUNG**

By 1981 Mensch was spreading his wings as a manager in his own right, signing NWOBHM rising stars Def Leppard while scouting around for more. "Peter can deal with five different bands at five different levels on every given day, easy," says Jeffery. "That's how he operates."

With frustration mounting in the studio, Mensch was increasingly being seen as the enemy. "I think they felt Peter was becoming part of this big thing where the personalised things, the caring, were no longer there," says Jeffery. "But Peter never stopped caring, believe you me."

That wasn't how the band – in particular Malcolm – were seeing it. Five days after their Donington appearance, AC/DC fired Peter Mensch. He declined to be interviewed for this piece, but did send the following message by email: "I was never told why I was fired. They called their lawyer, who called David Krebs, who called me. It was the Thursday after the first Castle Donington Monsters Of Rock show. And that is the only question I will answer."

Looking back with the benefit of 30 years, Jeffery says now: "They just felt that Mensch was only turning up when it was time to give them more float [money], saying: 'Why are you not done yet?' He wasn't being in sympathy with them and feeling what they were feeling. They felt a bit isolated and they felt they were being pushed and it was going wrong with Mutt, you know. It wasn't happening in the studio and hadn't been for a while. And Peter hadn't seen that."

Nevertheless, for Jeffery, who would effectively take over as the band's day-to-day manager, it was a bombshell. "I told them: 'I don't think anything has changed with Mensch'," Jeffery explains. "Malcolm's like: 'Well, it fucking has!' At that point, you may as well just let him have another drink and go through the reasons why, you know. It's done, it's finished."

Back in Paris, the same couldn't be said for the album. The band were becoming increasingly bored waiting for Lange to put the finishing touches on take after take. "They would jam for hours just for the fun of it," recalls Mark Dearnley. "I've got out-takes of Angus singing *Feelings* and stuff like that."

While Angus Young now concedes that Lange "did a great job" on *For Those About To Rock*, Malcolm Young had already decided that he'd seen and heard enough.

"The attitude was: 'What the fuck are we paying this guy all this money for? We can fucking do it'," recalls Jeffery. "It really soured when they started to look at the figures Mutt was being paid. They felt that they didn't need him: 'We write the songs and now we know what to do, we've done a couple of albums with him, game's up, you know, we don't need him any more'."

For Those About To Rock marked the end of Lange's relationship with AC/DC. The famously reclusive producer has never opened up about being dropped by AC/DC. In a rare online conversation, he merely commented that "Angus has a certain vision for his music, which works for him".

"By the time we'd completed the album," Malcolm says, "I don't think anyone, neither the band nor the producer, could tell whether it sounded right or wrong. Everyone was fed up with the whole album."

Listening back now, it's not difficult to see why. Tracks like the pedestrian first single *Let's Get It Up*, or the self-consciously scary *Evil Walks*, lacked the energy and wit of old. Double entendres had become single; riffs that had once been recycled were in danger of sounding tired and thin.

The only song that truly reached the same heights as the best songs on Lange's two previous AC/DC albums is the titanic title track. Starting life as usual with a chorus and riff concocted by Angus and Malcolm, Johnson's lyrical theme was supplied by a book Angus had come across about Roman gladiators. Its title, *For Those About To Die We Salute You*, was taken from the oath each gladiator would address the emperor with as they went into battle: 'Ave Caesar morituri te salutant' (Hail Caesar, we who are about to die salute you.) "We thought: 'For those about to rock'," says Angus. "I mean, it sounds a bit better than 'for those about to die'."

A journey song (in that it starts relatively slowly before moving through the gears towards a tremendous, all-guitars-and-drums-blazing finalé), its other signature motif was the sound effect of cannons blasting off as a prelude to its scorching climax – inspired by the cannons fired at the wedding that year between Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles. The band had been at the rehearsal room in Bercy when Angus noticed "the royal wedding thing" on the TV in the night manager's office. He picked up on the sound of the cannons, and a lightbulb went on in his head. "I just wanted something strong," he says now. "Something masculine, and rock'n'roll. And what's more masculine than a canon, you know? I mean, it gets loaded, it fires, and it destroys." So powerfully embedded would the image of cannons become that they even had one on the album's sleeve, gifting rock one of its most iconic covers.

With the recording sessions finally wrapped up at the end of September, Atlantic hurried to get the new AC/DC album out in time for Christmas. Released in the UK on November 23, 1981, *For Those About To Rock We Salute You* was greeted warmly by fans and critics still basking in the heat of its mega-hit predecessor. It did not, however, follow *Back In Black* to No.1 in Britain, peaking at No.3 behind the Human League's *Dare* and Queen's *Greatest Hits*. And while it did provide the band with their first US No.1 album, sales only reached the same comparatively modest levels as *Dirty Deeds*, much as Atlantic's Phil Carson had predicted. Indeed, 30 years on *For Those*… has sold four million copies in the US – roughly 18 million less than *Back In Black* and, astonishingly, two million less even than *Dirty Deeds*…

"LETTING GO OF MUTT LANGE WAS A MISTAKE. WITH HIM THEY WERE CRAFTED RECORDS, WITHOUT TAKING AWAY THE SPONTANEITY." IAN JEFFERY

So powerfully embedded did the image of cannons become within the band's psyche that when the subsequent tour began in the US on November 14, along with the two-and-a-half ton Hell's Bell that had first appeared suspended above the drums on the *Back In Black* tour there were now two dozen 'cannons' added to the stage show.

"There were 12 black boxes each side, in two rows of six that looked nothing like cannons," Jeffery laughingly recalls. "Until they were lifted up from the ground behind the PA and barrels popped out – when they worked. Built by Light And Sound Design. Fire!"

The scene backstage had also changed significantly. While the band had never been short of female admirers in Australia and Britain – particularly the insatiable Bon Scott – in America AC/DC were now attracting the kind of high-heeled, spandex-and-boob-tube-clad groupies previously reserved for Led Zeppelin and the Stones. With most of the band now married, however, as Johnson told one US reporter: "You never fuck them. You shake hands and that's it. That's for the crew. They're the ones with the passes, not us."

It wasn't just the groupies the band were now filtering out of their increasingly single-minded vision. More than on any previous tour, AC/DC now had things all their own way. With no Bon around for backstage visitors to enjoy a drink and a laugh with, the job fell to Brian and occasionally Cliff to keep the party fires burning. Which if you liked a pint and a roll-up they were good at. The days of running off with whatever group of hell-raisers happened to come around town were long gone, though. They weren't even keen to mingle with the other bands. "I like a nice cup of tea," Angus would explain, "and a bit of quiet before the show." Malcolm, it seemed, just liked to be left the fuck alone.

San Francisco rockers Y&T opened for AC/DC on the UK leg of the *For Those About To Rock* tour in September 1982. "Somebody told us: 'Malcolm is a real hard-ass, so don't say anything that's gonna piss him off or you'll be off the tour in five minutes'," recalls Y&T singer Dave Meniketti.

More troubling in America were the renewed protests from a whole load of right-wing Christian groups, whose tanks had been amassed on the AC/DC lawns since Angus had been depicted wearing toy devil-horns on the cover of *Highway To Hell*. On one level, the "God botherers", as Johnson called them, could be dismissed as just plain silly. He recalls a leaflet handed out by some Jesus freaks circling the environs of the Cabo Hall in Detroit where the US tour began, which claimed: 'The Bible says the Word of the Devil is Evil and so is rock'n'roll'. "I don't remember the Bible mentioning rock'n'roll," he wheezed.

It was a story that continued to follow AC/DC throughout their US tour, with the self-avowed Christian Right citing new *For Those About To Rock* tracks like *C.O.D.* (an acronym not just for Cash On Delivery but also Care Of the Devil) and *Evil Walks* as more proof of the band's devilish intentions. Even ostensibly more clued-up institutions like *Rolling Stone* magazine jumped on the AC/DC-are-bad-for-you bandwagon, describing them in their Record Guide as: "an Australian hard rock band whose main purpose on earth apparently is to offend anyone within sight or earshot. They succeed on both counts."

Ask AC/DC now what they made of the Christian groups protesting outside their shows, and Brian Johnson is philosophical: "That was the best promotion we could get. We took them over from Sabbath, you know. They were probably the same people calling Ozzy and Geezer Satanists. I don't know – maybe they were fanatics for hire."

"That's right," adds Angus sardonically, "they got paid by the hour."

By the time the *For Those About To Rock* world tour reached Europe at the end of 1982, a year after it had begun, things were at last running more smoothly. Bernie Marsden, then guitarist with European tour openers Whitesnake, had been a friend of Bon's in his party-hearty London days. "Things were different now, though," he says, "you could tell."

Apart from Johnson – "who'd you see at the hotel, maybe" – the other members of the band made themselves scarce outside the shows themselves. Marsden's fondest memory revolves around what he calls "the legendary AC/DC pub" that would be erected backstage each night – to save the band from having to actually rub shoulders with real people in an actual bar.

"There's a jukebox in there and a dartboard and a pool table. It even had beer on tap, with pumps and a barrel." After their first show together, in Germany, Marsden recalls: "We finished, went down to the dressing room and got cleaned-up a bit, came back up, and they still hadn't gone on. They were playing darts! Angus said to me: 'Come on, you be my partner. We're trying to get a double-eight to finish.' While there's 15,000 Germans going 'A-C-D-C! A-C-D-C!' Just going mad. And I suddenly realised we could have played an hour and a half and it wouldn't have mattered one iota."

Marsden made a point of staying to watch from the side every night. "I never realised until I watched it from that angle how much work Angus puts into the show," he recalls. "Angus is wringing wet before he goes on. He gets himself really fired up. And then you've got the complete other side of it with Malcolm just locking it down, standing there cool as a cucumber.

"You never really knew what was gonna happen, even though the show never changed that much every night. Phil Rudd, every third or fourth song, instead of smacking his snare drum he'd smack his thigh. He'd got this permanent sort of never-been-able-to heal-properly cut on his thigh, he'd hit it so hard with the stick each night."

By the time the tour finally ended, in Zurich, two weeks before Christmas 1982, AC/DC had confirmed their status as one of the biggest touring attractions in the world – big enough to have turned down $1 million to open a stadium show in America for the Rolling Stones. "Malcolm had decided they weren't ever going to open for anybody any more," Jeffery recalls.

But while the tour was a success, *For Those About To Rock We Salute You* would prove to be a watershed for the band. Without the old team of Mensch and Lange to guide them, none of the next three AC/DC albums would get near the US Top 10. Indeed it was not until 2008 and the release of *Black Ice* that they reached No.1 again.

Letting go of Mutt Lange, says Ian Jeffery now, "was a huge mistake – the biggest mistake. It was really sad. With Mutt Lange they were crafted records, without taking away the spontaneity of it sounding like a band playing."

The trouble was, for established figures like Mutt Lange and, before him, Peter Mensch (and, after him, Ian Jeffery, himself sacked in the wake of the commercial failure of the next AC/DC album, *Flick Of The Switch*) to be effective the band needed to cede elements of control. The problem was they were simply no longer prepared to do so.

From here on in, the world of AC/DC – the band that, during their formative years fronted by Bon Scott, had been an open invitation to all-comers to join in the fun; now, with Brian Johnson and everyone else doing as they were told by Malcolm and Angus – became a closed shop. Heads down, no-nonsense, not mindless but certainly no longer mindful of anyone outside their own inner circle. As Ian Jeffery says: "You're either totally in or totally out with them."

And the turning point was *For Those About To Rock We Salute You*, the flawed follow-up to one of the biggest albums in history and one that sealed the fate of AC/DC in so many different ways.

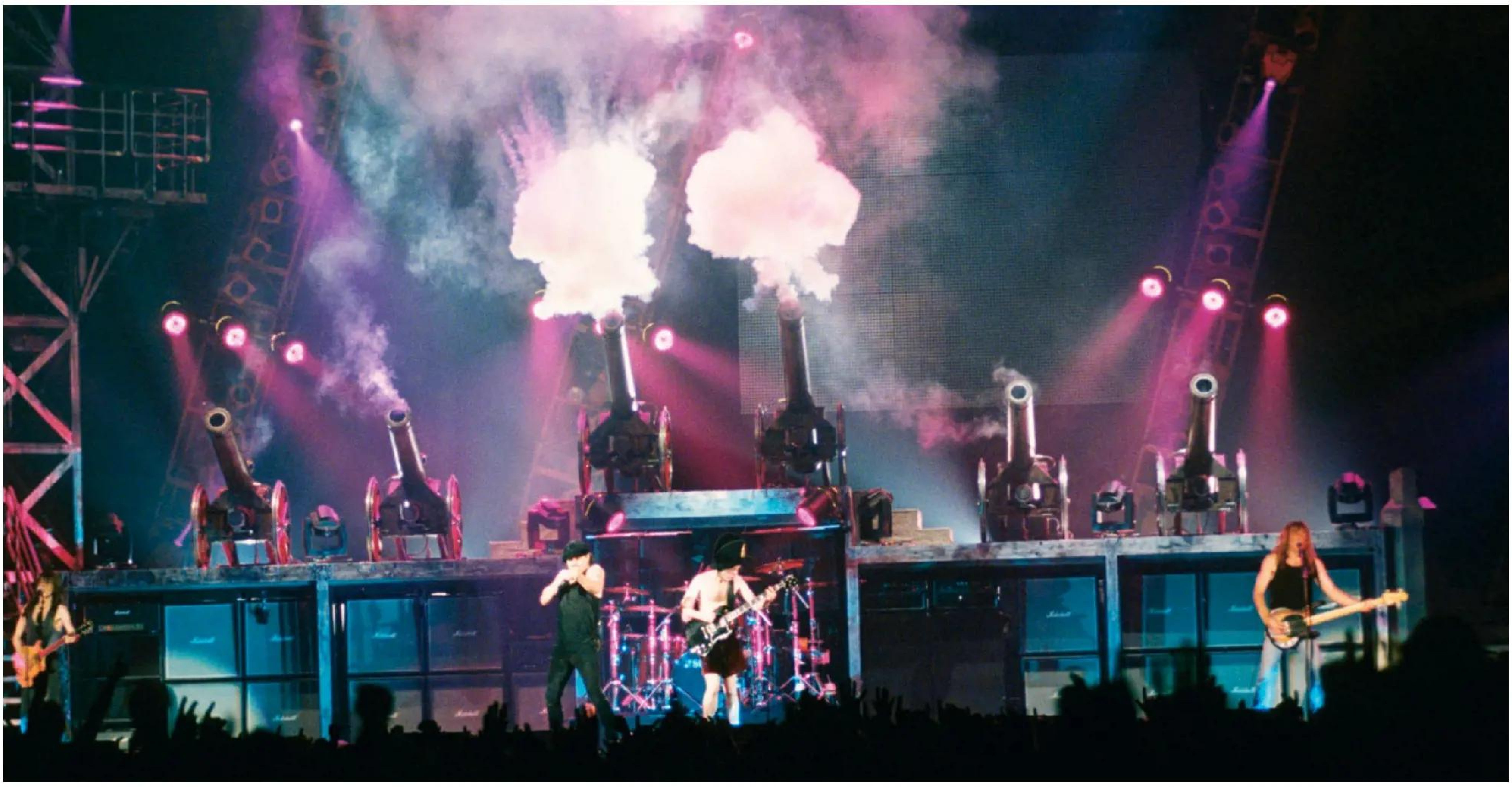
Ask Angus Young the last time he listened to that record, and his answer speaks volumes. "I don't listen to any of our albums – ever," he says. "I mean, I've written and recorded them. Why would I listen to them?"

1981 AC/DC ROLL OUT THE BIG GUNS

"WHAT'S MORE MASCULINE THAN A CANNON, Y'KNOW?"

AC/DC's explosive stage props have been part of their show for over thirty years. But their initial inspiration for using cannons came from a very unlikely source.

Words: **Henry Yates**



The cannons are impressive, but they came with teething troubles.

GETTY

Respect to Rosie, but rock's ultimate stage prop and boy's toy will always be the AC/DC cannon. Noisy, phallic, smelly and puerile, it seems incongruous that the band's iconic battery has its roots in the fairytale marriage of Prince Charles and Diana Spencer at St Paul's Cathedral in London on July 29, 1981.

That day, grinding out *For Those About To Rock* across the Channel in Paris, Angus had caught a snatch of the ceremony – and the attendant crack of cannon-fire – on the night manager's TV. The sound and symbolism, Young told us, was made-to-measure. "I just wanted something strong. Something masculine and rock'n'roll. And what's more masculine than a cannon, y'know? I mean, it gets loaded, it fires and it destroys."

> *"THESE HORRIBLE SPARKS COME OUT. I HAVE BURN MARKS ON MY SHOULDERS."*
> ***BRIAN JOHNSON***

For Those About To Rock's title track was duly punctuated by cannon-fire booms. And the concept kept on rolling, with a Napoleonic cannon appearing on the front of the album sleeve, and the associated tour kicking off in the United States on November 14 with two banks of artillery (to be 'fired' during the finalé).

"There were twelve black boxes each side, in two rows of six, that looked nothing like cannons," says tour manager Ian Jeffery. "Until they were lifted up from the ground behind the PA, and barrels popped out – when they worked."

Indeed, before the tour even reached the UK, reliability issues had caused the first batch of cannons – created by Birmingham' company Light & Sound Design (LSD) – to be scrapped.

"The original concept was based on flaps opening in PA stacks, and the cannons then emerging and firing as they would have done on a pirate ship," LSD co-founder Terry Lee tells us. "But the problems were both mechanical and pyrotechnic, and so they were replaced with something much more dramatic and reliable."

"There were sparks flying out everywhere," admitted Angus in 2004. "So we got rid of them pretty quick and got the two giant cannons that we put either side. The props don't always work."

Thirty-two years later, AC/DC's cannons endure. Even if Brian Johnson sometimes wishes they didn't.

"I could write a book about standing under the cannon for thirty years," the singer said back in June. "These horrible sparks come out of them. And at the end of the show I have burn marks all over my shoulders." ❼

1983-1986 THE 'DIFFICULT' YEARS

ROCK'N'ROLL DAMNATION

By the mid-80s, the huge success of *Back In Black* was a fading memory and AC/DC were on the ropes. If that wasn't enough, there was also a serial killer and the PMRC to contend with...

Words: **Ken McIntyre** Photos: **Tony Mottram**

80s AC/DC: a band out of time.

RETNA

AC/DC were, are and always will be a 70s rock band. They wore jeans and drank beer and sang songs about chicks. They weren't pretty and they weren't smart, but they knew every Chuck Berry riff and they knew how to throw a party – uncomplicated guys from an uncomplicated time.

If the 70s had lasted forever, flavourless mush like *Flick Of The Switch* and *Fly On The Wall* would've been just fine. Among the whirls, bells and bongs of a pinball arcade or on the clunking eight-track in the dashboard of a weed-belching boogie van, what difference could there really be between *Hells Bells* and *Sink The Pink*? No one would notice. AC/DC were part of the architecture of the 70s. Their sweaty mugs were on your walls and their iconic logo was on your chest, and that's just the way it was. But then the 80s happened, and it screwed everything up royally.

The 80s didn't actually start in 1980. No one knows for sure exactly when they kicked in, but the fact is, one morning we all woke up to a neon-pink world full of Boy Georges and synthesizers and Rubik's Cubes, and there was nothing we could do about it. Suddenly, everything we knew about rock was wrong. Denim was out, new wave was in, glam became metal, metal became Metallica and nobody wanted to listen to any boozy, long-haired, jeans-wearing, mascara-free old-timey rock'n'roll bullshit. Which was unfortunate, because AC/DC really didn't know how to play anything else.

1983's *Flick Of The Switch* was the first AC/DC album to really get pounced on by the critics. *Rolling Stone* succinctly summed up the general outcry: "With *Flick Of The Switch*, the Australian mega-bar-band AC/DC has now made the same album nine times, surely a record even in heavy-metal circles."

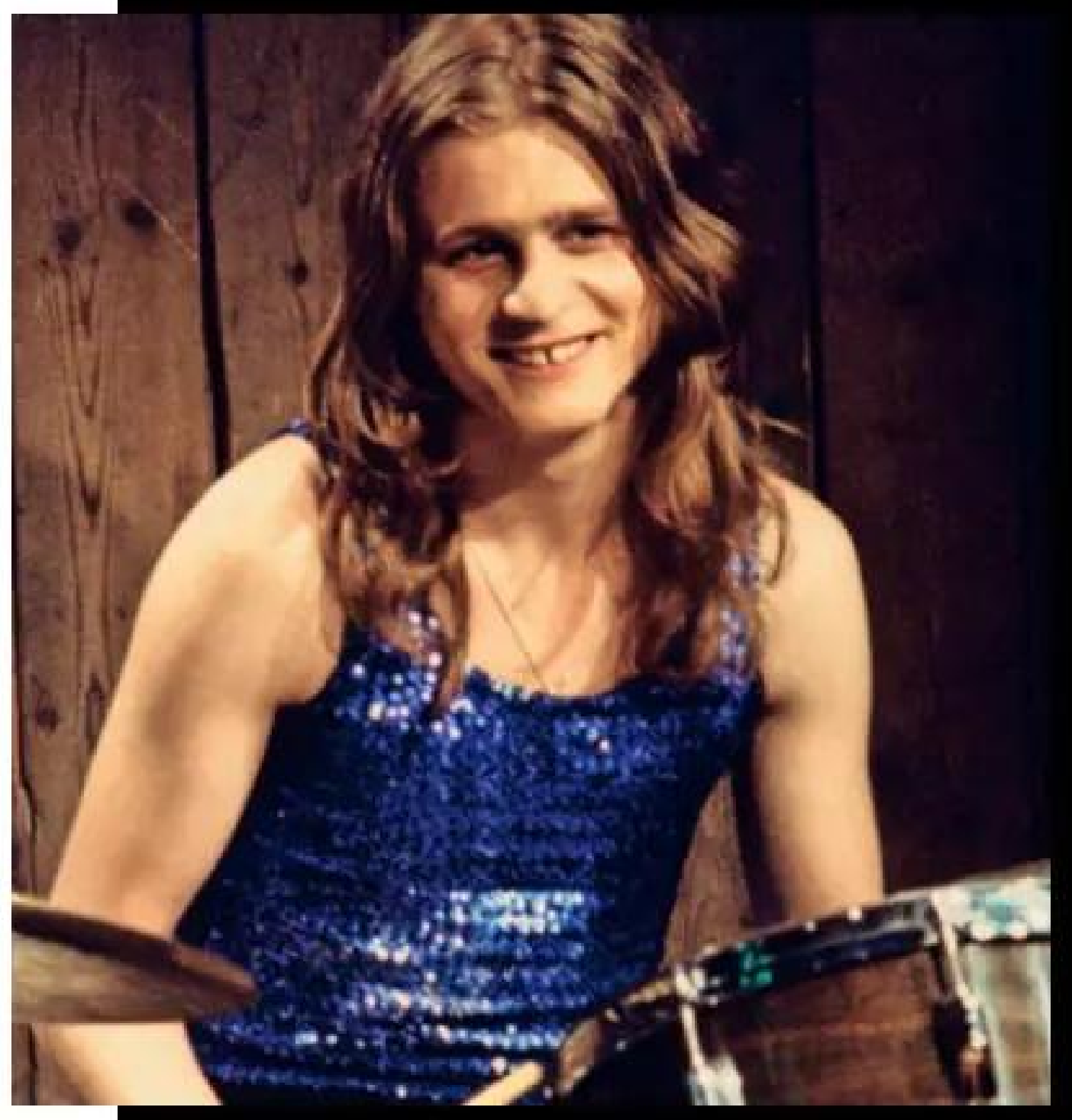
"THEY ASKED IF I COULD LEARN A FEW MORE SONGS…"

In 1983, AC/DC needed a new drummer. Roxy Music's **Paul Thompson** flew to New York City to audition.

How did you hear that AC/DC were seeking a drummer?
They tracked me down. I'd left Roxy Music in 1980 and I'd done a few things since but I was living on the Isle of Man at the time. Brian Johnson, who I'd grown up with back in the Geordie days, rang up and said they were looking for drummers and to expect a call from their tour manager. He called the next day and invited me to go over to New York, where the band were finishing their *Flick Of The Switch* album, and have a try-out for a few days. And he gave me a few AC/DC songs to learn – *Back In Black, Shot Down In Flames, Highway To Hell*.

On the face of it, Roxy Music and AC/DC aren't a natural fit, although it must be said, you clearly weren't the most glammed-up member of Roxy Music.
I certainly wasn't. I went along with it but it never happened naturally. I really liked playing the music, though. But I've always regarded myself as a rock drummer. I mean, John Bonham is my number one hero.

So they got you a plane ticket?
Yes, I flew over and joined them at the Parker Meridien Hotel. The first evening I went down to the rehearsal studios at SIR where they had a drum kit set up – I think it must have been Phil's kit – and I spent a couple of hours setting it up my way and playing around a bit. The next day I went with Angus, Malcolm and Cliff and we tried out the songs. I remember the room was set up like a tiny club with this little stage and a mixer at the other end of the room where one of the crew was recording it onto cassette. At the end they asked if I could learn a few more songs and come back and try them tomorrow.



Was Brian there?
Yes. He popped in briefly but he didn't hang around. I think he had recommended me and he wanted me to get the gig but he knew it was Malcolm and Angus's decision and he didn't want to interfere. I went out a couple of times for a beer with him and his then wife, who I also knew well.

How long were you there?
About a week. We spent several days playing more songs in the studio. Everything seemed to be going well from my point of view. I felt I was playing OK and I was also getting on with them well. It was obvious to me that Malcolm and Angus were in control but I really admired what they were doing. They did it their way and they didn't compromise. They weren't going to become some record company plan.

It all seemed to be going so well, but you didn't get the job. What happened?
On the last night, we went out to an Indian restaurant and Malcolm told me that they 'weren't sure'. I've got to admit, I lost my appetite for a bit. It was hard to know what to say. They said they were going to have more auditions in London and said they'd get in touch when they were over.

And did they?
No. After a few weeks I rang Brian and his wife told me that they'd found another drummer. I was disappointed, but you have to accept these things.

But no explanation?
No, although a couple of years later I met one of the road crew who told me the problem was that I was 'too big'. But I've no idea what truth there may be in that.

INTERVIEW: HUGH FIELDER

Angus Young's 1984 interview with *Guitar World* magazine was further proof that AC/DC didn't get the memo about the 70s being over. "We wanted this one as raw as possible," he said. "We didn't want echoes and reverb going everywhere and noise eliminators and noise extractors."

In other words, back to basics. You know, like in 1976.

Still, even if nobody particularly liked the last record, business was still brisk. They released the '74 *Jailbreak* EP, a collection of mouldy-oldies from their Aussie-only days, and it was gobbled up by the diehards. In August '84 they headlined the massive Monsters Of Rock festival at Donington, becoming the first band to headline twice. They may have been on the wane creatively – the now long-gone *Guns For Hire* was the only song from *Flick Of The Switch* that would survive their set-list by 1985 – but their wallets didn't notice.

After relentlessly touring the US and Europe in 1984, AC/DC capped off the year with a headline appearance at the Rock In Rio festival in January '85. Underwhelming album or not, the band were still huge, and getting bigger every day. But a sinister wind was blowing their way, one that found them embroiled in a troubling controversy over a six-year-old song hidden away on the B-side of *Highway To Hell*.

> *"WE WANTED TO BE AS RAW AS POSSIBLE. WE DIDN'T WANT ECHOES AND REVERB GOING EVERYWHERE."*
> **ANGUS YOUNG**

Richard Ramirez was a brutal serial killer who ran amok in LA and San Francisco in the early 80s, eventually murdering 13 people before he was chased down, captured and beaten by an angry mob in August 1985. Once he'd been caught, the public finally saw exactly who this 'Night Stalker' was: a deranged 25-year-old cat burglar with a penchant for satanism and – distressingly – a love of hard rock and heavy metal, particularly AC/DC, and especially that grisly old deep cut *Night Prowler*.

Naturally, the band rallied to the defence of their bluesy old chestnut, explaining to the press that the song, like all their songs, was about dirty, sticky, rowdy, climb-out-the-window-to-avoid-your-mum-and-dad sex. And it probably was. Still, it really does stink of some sort of malevolence, and lines like *'You don't feel the steel until it's hanging out your back'* didn't help their cause.

Suddenly, AC/DC were the definitive soundtrack to murder and mayhem, and they found themselves faced with nearly as many middle-aged anti-rock picketers at US shows as greasy-haired teenage punters. And this was still a month away from the PMRC's disastrous 'porn rock' hearings, which would demonise our beloved, beleaguered Aussie hellraisers further.

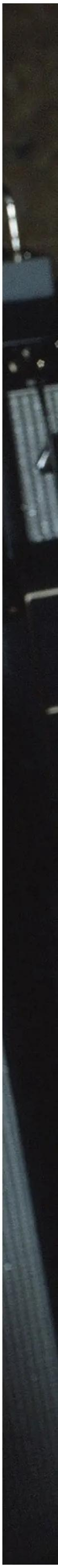
The PMRC (Parents Musical Resource Center) was a committee formed by the high-profile wives of several US lawmakers with the expressed goal of increasing parental control over what their offspring were listening to. They vowed to expose the disgusting, sex, drugs and Satan-crazed filth that 80s kids were digging.

Prior to the hearings, they released their still stunning 'Filthy Fifteen' memo, a list of the worst offenders they'd come across – a wide-ranging array of songs that spanned the radio spectrum, from pop crooners like Cyndi Lauper and Madonna to black-metal crazoids Venom. And smack in the middle, sandwiched between Twisted Sister's *We're Not Gonna Take it* (which made the list for its 'violent' lyrics) and Mötley Crüe's *Bastard* (ditto) was AC/DC's *Let Me Put My Love Into You*, a bluesy grinder from *Back In Black*. It made the list for its graphic sexual lyrics. Apparently goofy, ham-fisted metaphors like *'Let me cut your cake with my knife'* were just too hot to handle in 1985.

Some of rock's more vocal proponents stood up for AC/DC and other bands on the list. Dee Snider, Frank Zappa and even John Denver all appeared at the September hearings, defending the God-given right of every American to enjoy WASP's *Animal (Fuck Like A Beast)* in the comfort of their own home. AC/DC did not make it to that weird party. They were busy whipping up another batch of porn-rockers for their *Fly On The Wall* album. It probably wouldn't have helped anyway. The die was cast, and every AC/DC album in the racks – as well as just about any other record with even a twinge of sex, drugs, violence, the occult, or any other classic rock'n'roll pastime – was slapped with a 'Parental Advisory' sticker. Welcome to the 80s, boys.

Amid this storm of hysteria, AC/DC released their tenth album, *Fly On The Wall*. Like *Flick Of The Switch*, it was self-produced. Also like *Flick*, it was instantly forgettable. It still sold a million copies but barely scraped the Top 50 in the US, and did half the business of mega-sellers like *Back In Black*. The singles (the unfortunately titled *Sink The Pink* and *Shake Your Foundations*) went nowhere, at least until they were revamped for *Who Made Who*, the soundtrack album to Stephen King's *Maximum Overdrive*, and AC/DC found themselves to be thoroughly out of step with all the LA glam-slammers like Mötley Crüe, Guns N' Roses and Ratt, who were currently ruling the rock'n'roll roost.

As 1985 limped to a close, AC/DC were in a truly unenviable position – hated and feared by religious fanatics and nervous parents, dismissed as old and tired by their kids. For most bands this would be the end of the road. Luckily, AC/DC are not most bands. ❼



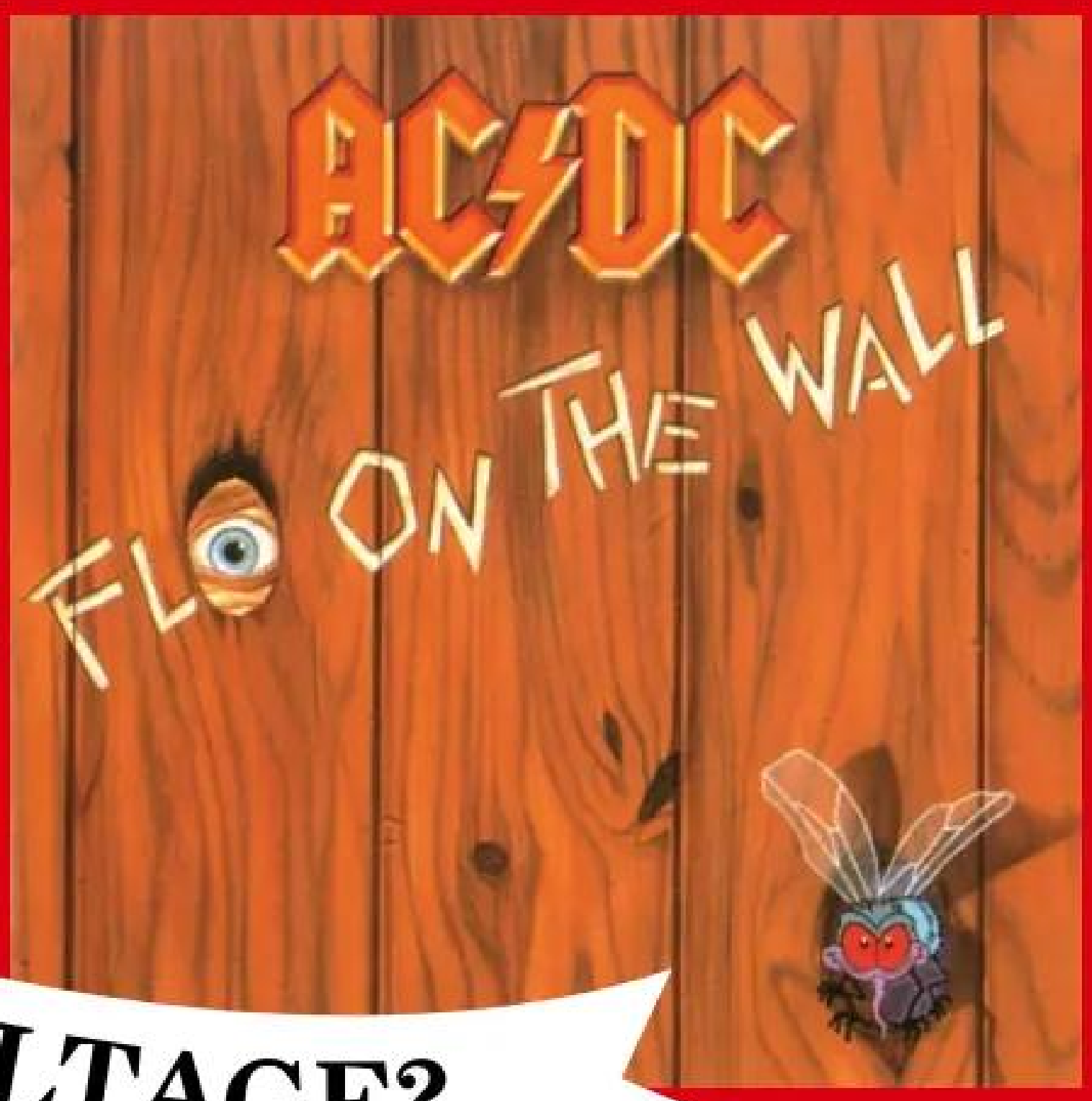
GETTY

RETNA

Raw power: Angus keeps it simple but very effective.

IN THE BADLANDS

AC/DC THE FINAL SALUTE



LOW VOLTAGE?

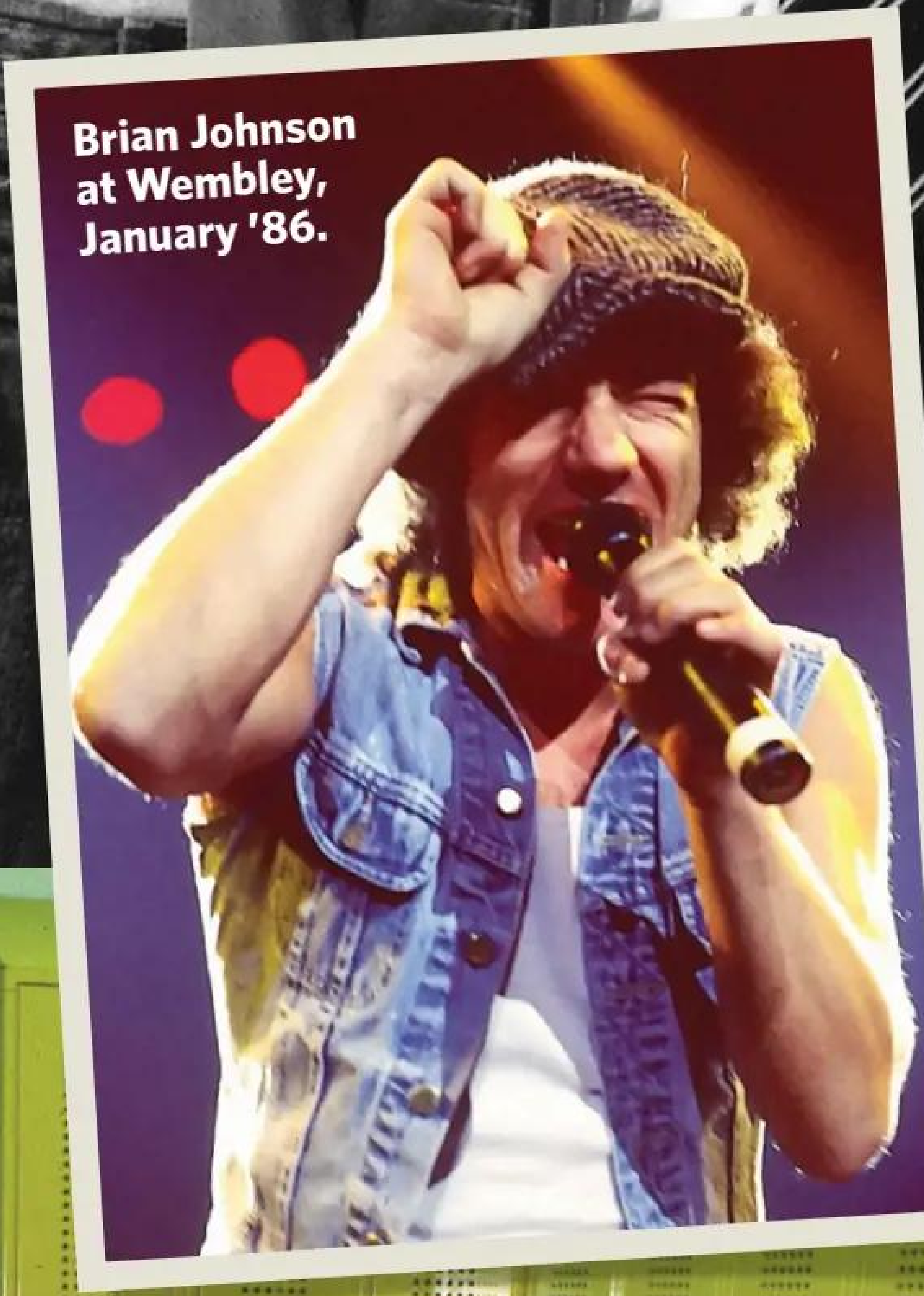
FLICK OF THE SWITCH 1983

FLY ON THE WALL 1985

In the era of 80s pop and hair metal, AC/DC went back to basics on a pair of self-produced albums that are about as popular as a permed mullet today.

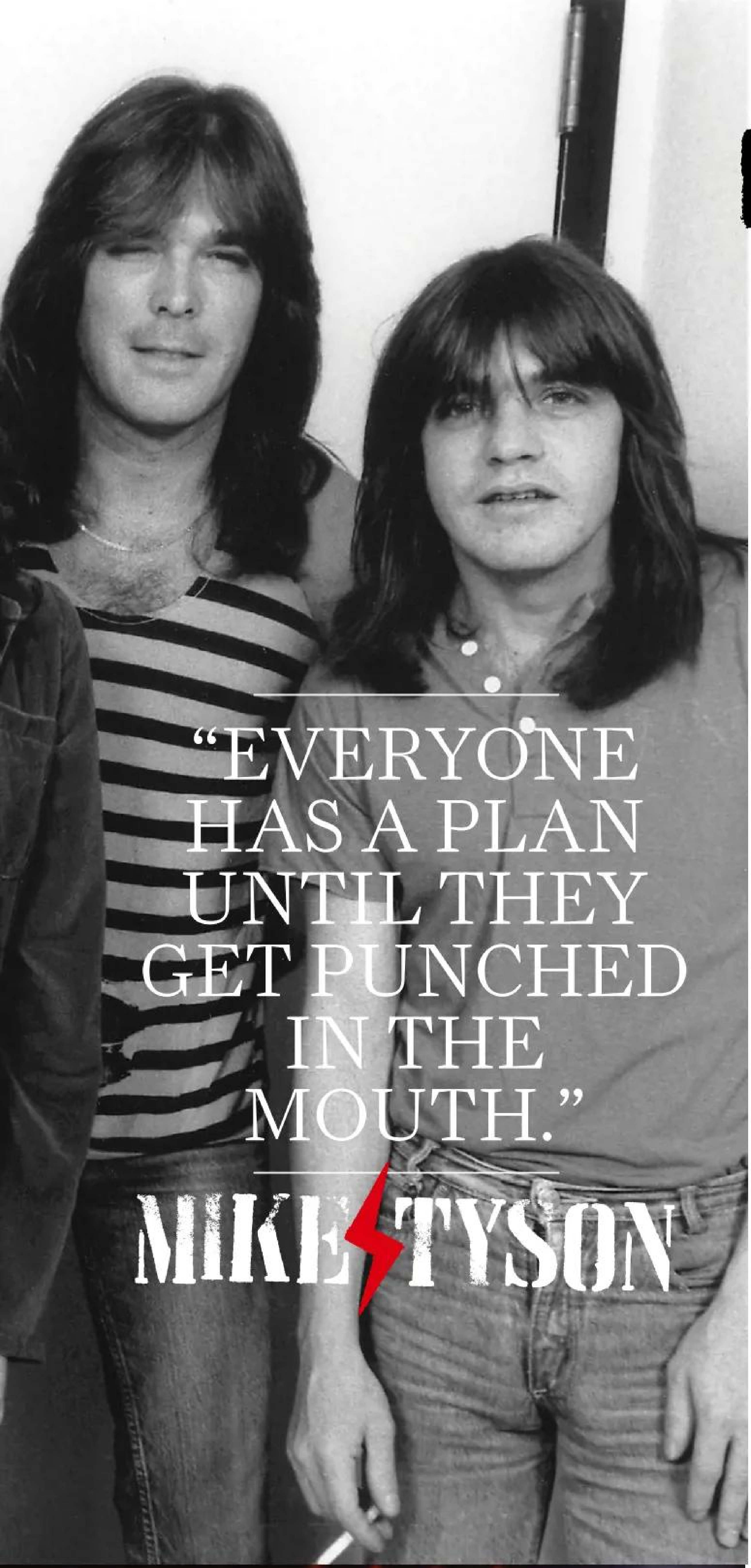
Words: **Ben Mitchell**

Nassau Coliseum, November 1985.



Brian Johnson at Wembley, January '86.

Getting ready to rock on the *Fly On The Wall* tour in '85.



“EVERYONE HAS A PLAN UNTIL THEY GET PUNCHED IN THE MOUTH.”

MIKE TYSON

ALL PICS: ICONPIX

Angus: stripped for action:.

To anyone outside the hard rock tent, it’s laughable to hear that there once was a time when AC/DC yearned to get back to basics. Nonetheless, 1981’s *For Those About To Rock (We Salute You)* had reached a level of studio sophistication that felt unnecessarily fussy to Malcolm and Angus Young. What had worked so well with producer Robert John ‘Mutt’ Lange on the preceding two records – crisp tour de force *Highway To Hell* (1979) and the sans Bon phenomenon *Back in Black* (1980) – was applying reasonable rigour to making AC/DC sound extremely loud and incredibly close. *For Those About To Rock* found Lange questing ever further for sonic perfection, which was a time-consuming process. After this Michelin-starred philosophy, the Young brothers wanted to take a greasy spoon approach to their next album. To that end, they chose to produce it themselves.

Flick Of The Switch is the result of this decision. It was recorded at Compass Point Studios in Nassau, the capital city of the Bahamas. This was where AC/DC had created *Back In Black* , but though the new raw tapes sounded reminiscent of their greatest commercial triumph, it was mixed by engineer Tony Platt to impart a different feel. “I don’t think that was a good thing to do at all,” Platt later remarked.

The Young brothers had wanted something more immediate, less refined, than their last record. This they got, as *Flick Of The Switch* definitely seems thrown together and lacks the Kubrickian craftsmanship of a Mutt Lange piece. The unalloyed audio isn’t what’s wrong here, because a bit of grit never hurt an AC/DC song – the problem is that the songs are unexceptional.

The material ranges from weak (*Bedlam In Belgium, Nervous Shakedown*) to acceptable (*Guns For Hire*, the title track, *Badlands*) by way of boring (*Rising Power, Deep In The Hole*). There’s a tang of reheated leftovers about the riffs, while lyrically the leitmotif has shifted from impish to oafish. A change from Lange wasn’t necessarily a mistake, but not having a strong producer involved to make sure AC/DC cut the mustard certainly was.

Released on August 15, 1983, *Flick Of The Switch* contains zero hit singles. It initially sold 500,000 copies in America to reach No.15 on the album chart, eventually cracking the million sales mark 18 years later. In the UK it debuted at a peak position of No.4, pushing Spandau Ballet’s *True* down a notch but unable to muscle past *Fantastic* by Wham! to climb into the medal positions.

By AC/DC’s standards, it was a monumental failure. They were a man down, too, after Malcolm Young had got into an extremely heated personal disagreement with Phil Rudd in Nassau. The drummer’s restrained sense of purpose behind the kit had anchored the band’s inimitably straightforward rhythm unit since 1975. Regardless of the quality of his service, Rudd’s run-in with AC/DC’s fun-sized guv’nor abruptly left him free to explore new career opportunities.

During the ensuing tour, AC/DC’s profile was still sufficiently high for them to be covered by US celebrity weekly *People* magazine. “Angus, the group’s wild man onstage, is actually a teetotaller away from the spotlight who uses his private time to paint landscapes,” noted the report from one of two shows played at Philadelphia’s Spectrum arena in November 1983. It also revealed that Brian Johnson was particularly enjoying a biography of Winston Churchill. The man from *People* was lucky enough to meet Johnson’s father, a retired sergeant major who had this to say about his evening: “I was at Monte Cassino when the Americans flattened the place, and I was at El Alamein when we knocked Rommel back with a big barrage of guns, but I’ve never heard anything as loud as this in my life.”

Business on the *Flick Of The Switch* dates was far from brisk, though AC/DC’s commitment to intense live performance – with 20-year-old Simon Wright on drums – was never less than total.

A perspicacious quote from one of the era’s big hitters of a different type, Mike Tyson, rings true for AC/DC’s situation following *Flick Of The Switch*: “Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” The band had undoubtedly taken a commercial and critical one-two right in the kisser but instead of adjusting their tactics, they pressed ahead. By electing to again self-produce for 1985’s *Fly On The Wall*, they were inviting another blow to land. Sure enough, the haymaker that duly arrived struck them firmly in the area directly below the belt.

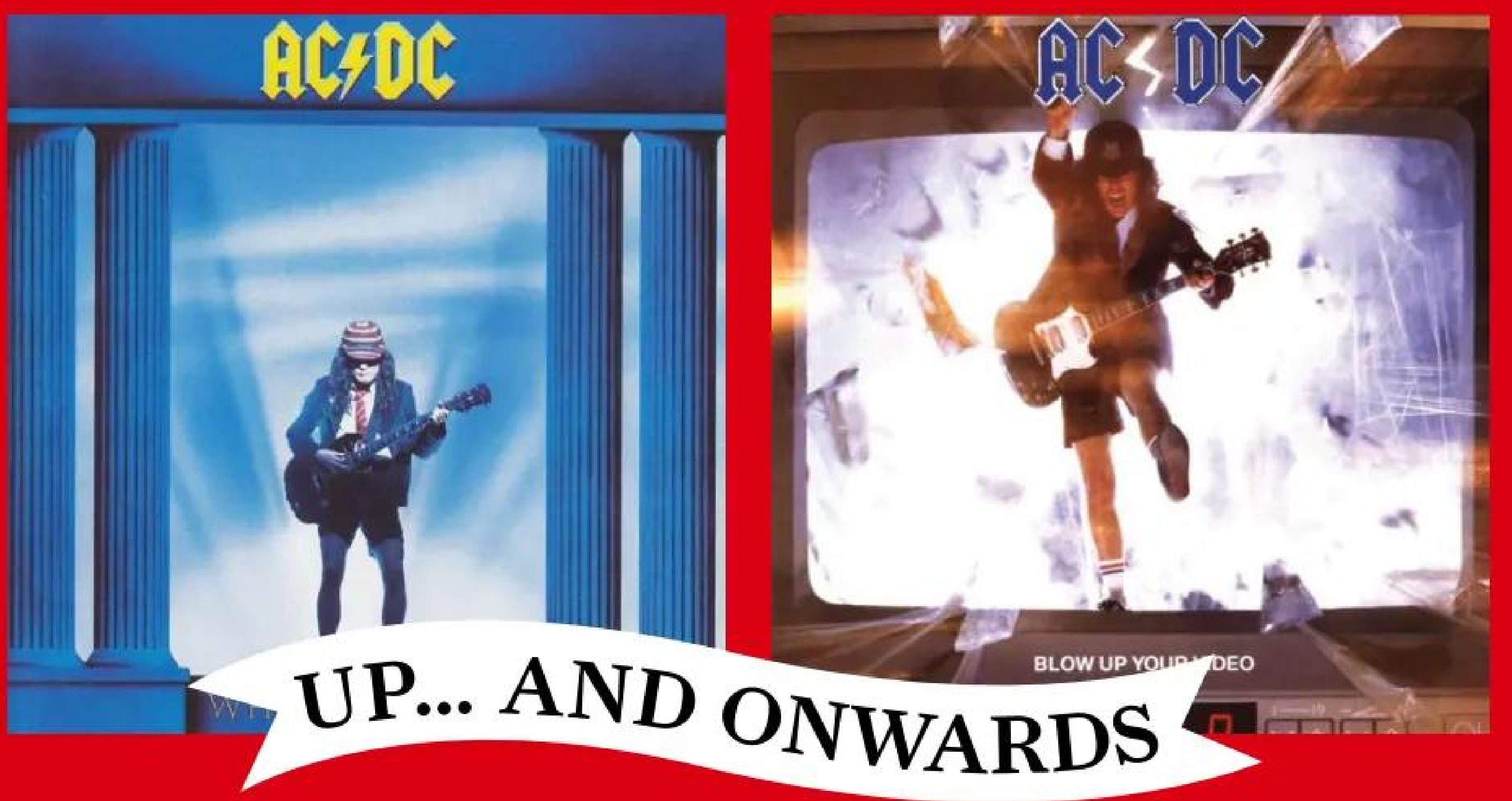
Illustrated by pop surrealist Todd Schorr, the cover of *Fly On The Wall* is awful for two reasons. First, as a literal interpretation of the title it fails because the cartoon fly depicted is not on the wall but – as evidenced by a backdrop consisting solely of floorboards – on the floor. Secondly, the knothole in the ‘wall’ through which a single eye peeps disrupts the lettering so it reads ‘Flo On The Wall’. The band’s logo being correct and legible is all that has gone right here. So the packaging isn’t exactly vintage, but it’s the music that counts.

Unfortunately, on this score, *Fly On The Wall* is lacklustre from start to finish. Recorded at Mountain Studios in Montreux, the production is rattly and thin. Johnson’s vocals receive especially poor treatment, so deep in the mix as to suggest that he was shouting from an adjacent bathroom with a lukewarm flannel pressed to his face.

Charitably, it could be said that *Sink The Pink* and *Shake Your Foundations* translated well as live tracks, but neither has been a set list mainstay for 30 years. *Danger* is comfortably among the most disgracefully lazy songs AC/DC ever concocted and that was put out as the lead single. The album got to No.7 in the UK but didn’t breach the Top 30 in America, where it sold 500,000 copies (platinum certification was awarded in 2001). The reviews, too, were negative. While *Flick Of The Switch* could be explained away as a well-intentioned misfire, this was just embarrassing.

Now some might argue that AC/DC were simply at odds with the prevailing winds of the genre. Indeed, Johnson has said that around this time it was suggested by the band’s label that they might benefit from an image overhaul (he recalls that the reply consisted of two words; the second was “you”, the first was not “thank”). Yes, Mötley Crüe’s *Theatre Of Pain* album had just come out with a hit, *Home Sweet Home*, that initiated hair metal’s power ballad gold rush. The idea that glamorous personnel and slow songs equated to fast success – aided by MTV-friendly videos geared for crossover appeal – made sense if you were one of the berks in Poison, but AC/DC were a country mile away from the section of rock’s Venn diagram populated by such poseurs. This was a band built on substance over style. *Fly On The Wall* stiffed only because it had no substance whatsoever.

GOING INTO OVER-DRIVE



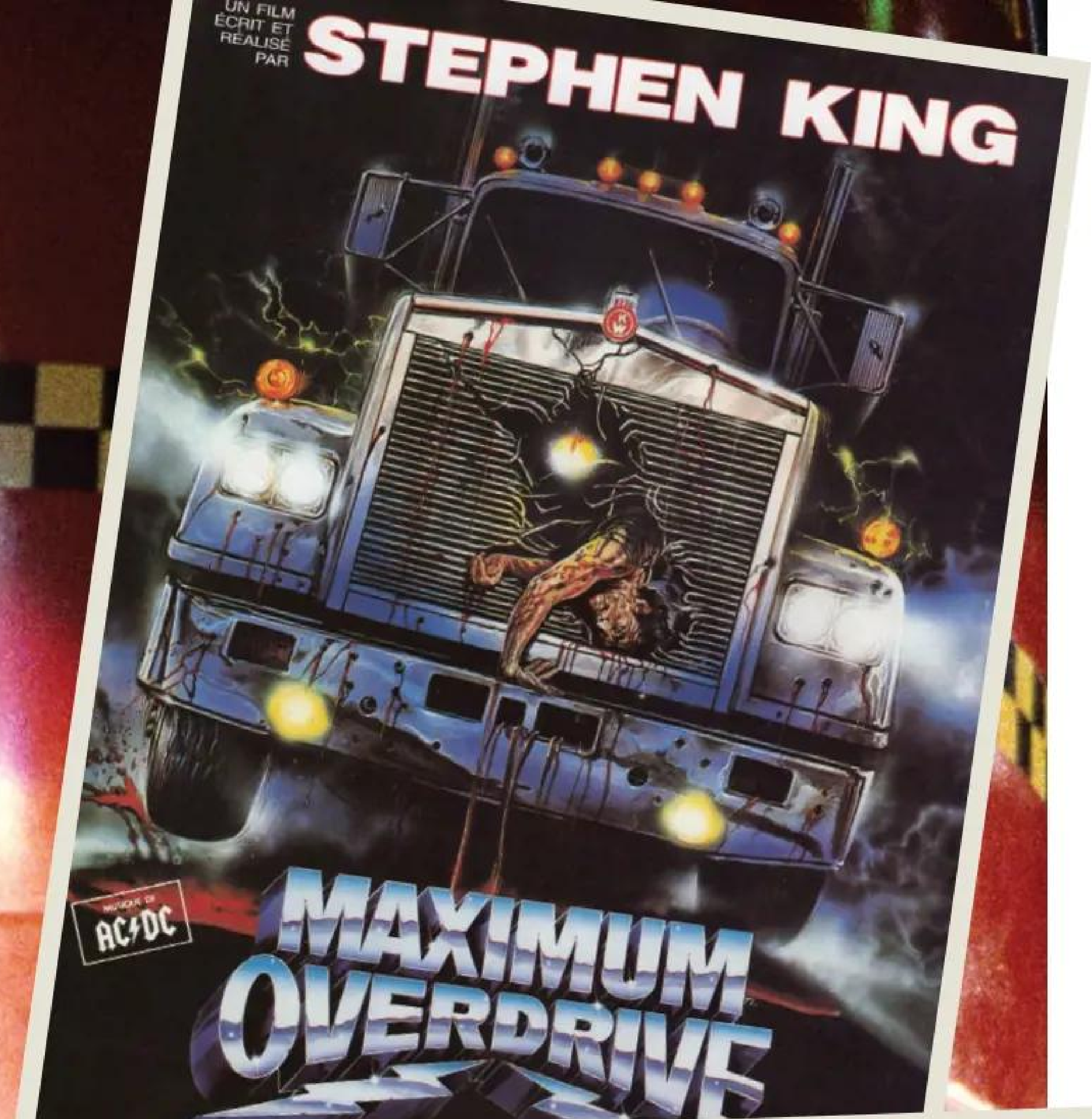
UP… AND ONWARDS

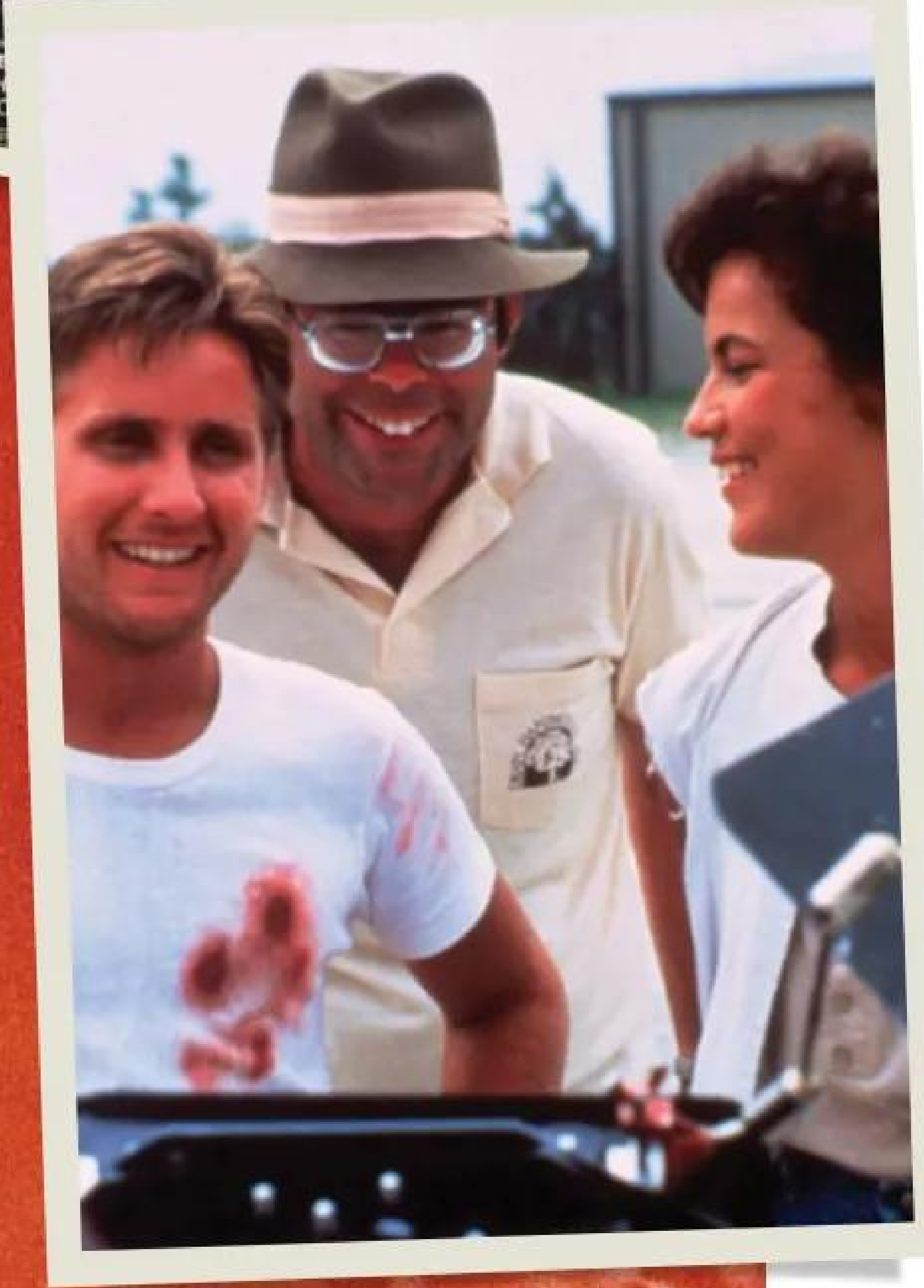
WHO MADE WHO 1986 BLOW UP YOUR VIDEO 1988

AC/DC
AC/DC
BLOW UP YOUR VIDEO

In the mid-80s, as glam glittered, preened and prospered, AC/DC looked like a band out of time. Then along came horror writer Stephen King…

Words: **Ken McIntyre**





Emilio Estevez (left) and Stephen king on the set of *Maximum Overdrive*.

It wasn't easy for a 70s era rock crew to remain vital and relevant in the plastic-fantastic Neverland of the mid-80s. It was even tougher for the sawn-off working men in AC/DC who were settling into crinkly faced middle age in sweat-soaked blue jeans and black T-shirts when the rest of the world had gone full glam. There was a chance, infinitesimal as it might've been, that AC/DC wouldn't have even survived the hairspray wars; that they would ultimately be dismissed and discarded, as newer, prettier rock'n'roll gods like Sebastian Bach or Brett Michaels were ordained. They were certainly outnumbered and outgunned.

So it was serendipitous indeed when, some time in 1986, America's most prominent and oddly regular-Joe-ish horror author, Stephen King, came knockin' on AC/DC's door. He was directing his first (and only, it turns out) movie, a haunted truck (!) tale called *Maximum Overdrive*, and he needed a soundtrack that, basically, sounded like the title. And AC/DC was his favourite band. And they were hoping to ride the rest of the glam era out under the radar anyway. So things worked out.

Maximum Overdrive was no masterpiece, but it revitalised AC/DC's career. *Who Made Who* is a soundtrack to a dumb horror movie, but it's also a compilation of classic AC/DC jams, prefect for turning on a whole new breed of teenage heroes and zeroes to their simple riffy pleasures. It is difficult to rate it as anything other than a truncated greatest hits album, since it contains crucial numbers from *Back In Black* (*Hells Bells*, *Shook…*), *For Those About to Rock* (title track), *Dirty Deeds* (*Ride On* – okay, weird choice, but still), and, erm, *Fly On The Wall*. It does contain a smattering of non-vault numbers, however, including the screeching, storming title track and a few instrumental passages. *Who Made Who* – the song – worked on many levels. On the surface it's a just a classic AC/DC riff'n'roller, effortlessly tough and swaggering. But the lyrics reflect not only the man-versus-machine plot of the movie, but also the band's stature in rock'n'roll at that particular juncture in time.

The song was a fairly big and surprising hit for the fellas. And once it clicked in folks' heads that the soundtrack was also an AC/DC hits compilation it flew off the shelves and ultimately went platinum – five times over. And it did so despite the hilariously inorganic drum sounds that somehow got wrangled out of long-running hired gun Simon Wright for the title song. Seriously, it sounds like something whipped up by the Sisters Of Mercy's drum machine. And the instrumental tracks, written by the brothers Young while bobbing around in the pristine waters of the Bahamas, are nothing special. But who cares? It's just a bunch of solid AC/DC jams backing up some movie about a killer truck with the Green Goblin glued to its grill. Nobody died because of *Who Made Who*, man. Except for the dude in *Maximum Overdrive* who got his brains blown out by a killer soda machine. Spoiler alert.

‘MAXIMUM OVERDRIVE REVITALISED AC/DC'S CAREER.'

Two years after the – let's face it – easy triumph of *Who Made Who*, it was time for our favourite Aussies to put up or shut-up and get a new album of originals out. *For Those About to Rock* was almost a decade away at this point, and no one considered *Flick Of The Switch* or *Fly On The Wall* to be anywhere near that level of quality. Malcolm was struggling with his alcohol issues at this point. Glam was about to fall off a cliff but nobody knew that in '88, and AC/DC had really had it with all the posing and preening.

And that's how we got to *Blow Up Your Video*, with booze and unrest and the all-consuming electric eye of MTV. Harry Vanda and George Young, the men who essentially orchestrated the AC/DC sound, were back on board to produce, and the band were primed to claw their way back to the top of the hard rock heap.

Long story short, that's exactly what happened. Short story long, the comeback was based largely on just two or three songs. Short story shorter, if you jumped from 1981 to 1990's *The Razors Edge*, you wouldn't miss much. Although you would miss *Heatseeker*, and that would be a shame. Along with second-single *That's The Way I Wanna Rock N' Roll*, *Heatseeker* was the album's runaway hit, a deceptively subtle ode to the band's 50s-era Chuck Berry duck-walking roots that does not clobber you over the head like the majority of AC/DC mega-jams do, but rather hits a thrumming, low-key groove and sticks with it. Similarly, *That's The Way I Wanna Rock'n'Roll* takes a hard left from clanging, metal-dominated 80s and essentially imagines a hard-rock Elvis. It was a canny move indeed to remind the long-haired hoi-polloi about where the band came from, especially during a time when AC/DC looked and sounded nothing like their Sunset-stripping contemporaries. Their long journey back to cultural relevance had already turned a corner – The Cult had recently turned into a hip-kid AC/DC, with many more Angus-ites plugging away in garages far and wide – but *Blow Up Your Video*'s twin singles hastened the process significantly. The message was clear: trends come and go, but AC/DC were forever. To paraphrase the great and noble psychedelic sage Roky Erickson, AC/DC had always been here before.

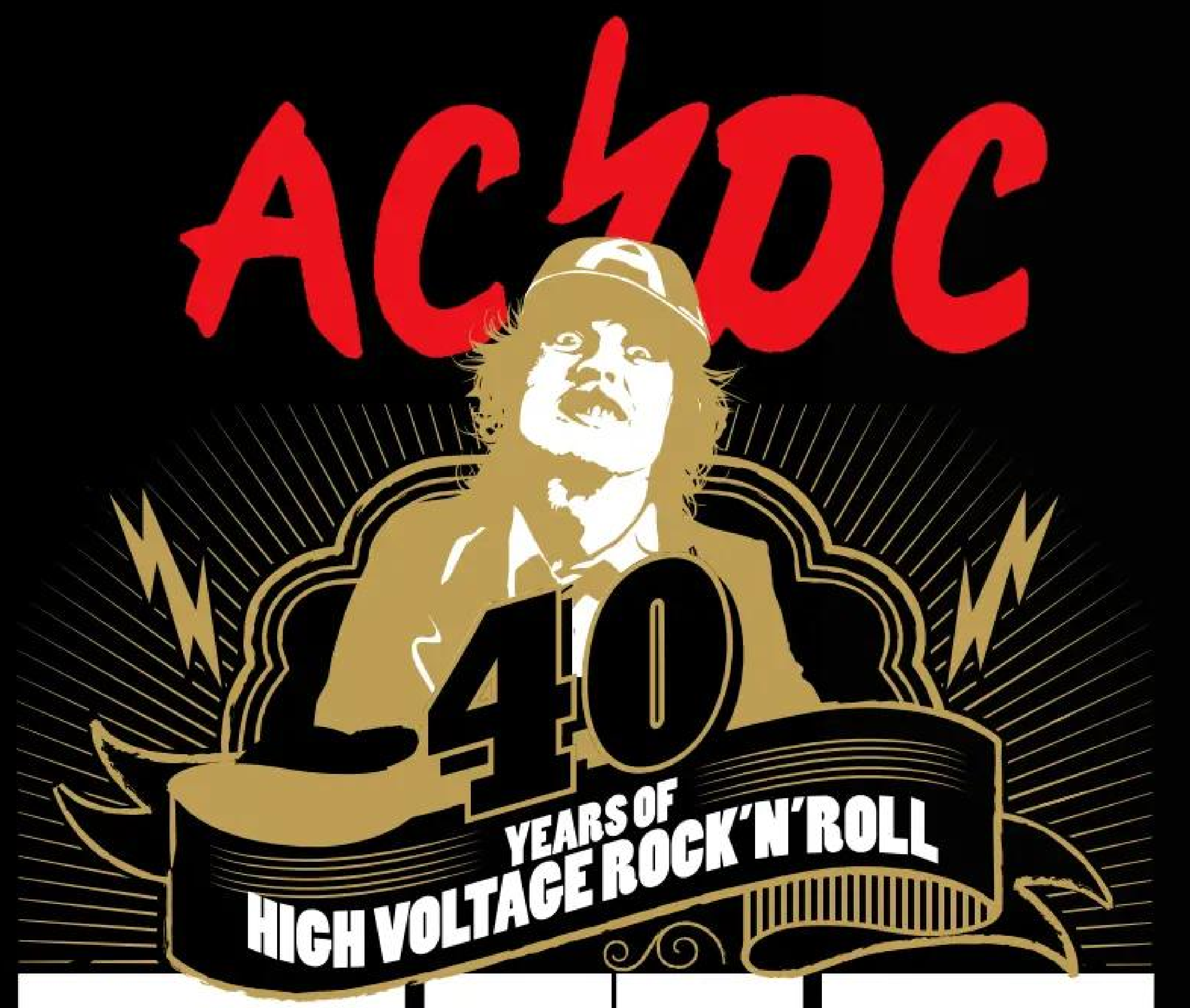
And while all that's great, *Blow Up Your Video* is still not a great AC/DC album. Apart from those two songs it's largely a slog through fairly pedestrian deep cuts. And that's really the major difference between great AC/DC albums (*High Voltage*, *Highway To Hell*, *Back In Black*), and not-so great ones (*Flick Of The Switch*, *Fly On The Wall*, this one): the good ones are all killer, no filler, every song a finely crafted morsel of hard-core rock'n'roll so tight and lethal it can't even be reasoned with, stacked two-sides high. Back in their salad days, AC/DC were working-class heroes who knew how much sweat went into every buck, and that's why the early albums were so dense with good stuff. You earned it, and they took pride in a job well done. Nobody ever bought *Powerage* and felt cheated. You might feel a little slighted banging through go-nowhere boogie-dirges like *Ruff Stuff*, *Go Zone* or *Nick of Time*, however.

As a whetting of the appetite for the return-to-form *The Razors Edge*, *Blow Up Your Video* is a decent reminder that on a good night AC/DC are the best band in the world ever always, Amen. But if they had to live or die on the strength of individual albums, there'd be a fair amount of wheezing in the AC/DC camp by the end of '88. Stay for the singles and then get the fuck outta here, man.

BLOW UP YOUR VIDEO
AC/DC
AC/DC
AC/DC

Video stars: precious metal in return for precious hard rock.

DISCS AND MAIN IMAGE: GETTY; KING: ALAMY



THE 90s

Rehab... Reunions Rick Rubin... Making videos with Arnie Schwarzenegger... The Frank Zappa connection... Rapping with Taj Mahal... Donington. Again.

1988-90 THE RESURGENCE OF AC/DC

HIGH VOLTAGE

Putting their wobbly mid-80s behind them, AC/DC ended the decade back at their fighting weight – even if it had entailed a trip to rehab for one member.

Words: **Paul Elliott**

In April 1988, Angus Young was asked how it felt to be fashionable again. "Disgusting!" the rocker replied with a laugh.

The joke was typical of a man who has never given two hoots about what tastemakers have to say. But the question was entirely valid at a time when AC/DC were finally pulling out of their mid-80s slump.

Angus was talking to *Sounds* journalist Mary Anne Hobbs during the video shoot for the band's single *That's The Way I Wanna Rock 'N' Roll*. Their previous release, the blistering, full-throttle rock'n'roll song *Heatseeker,* had recently reached No.12 on the UK chart – the biggest hit single of their entire career. Parent album *Blow Up Your Video* had hit number two. But the chart positions, while impressive, were only a part of the story.

What made AC/DC fashionable in 1988, and relevant to a younger rock audience, was the kudos they received from some of the rising stars of the era. "Suddenly AC/DC are in vogue and as a ripe as Zeppelin for plagiarism," Hobbs wrote. "The renegades of the metalloid resurgence are quick to cite AC/DC's influence, and regurgitate their riffs whole."

Guns N' Roses named AC/DC as a key inspiration alongside Aerosmith and the Sex Pistols, and performed *Whole Lotta Rosie* during their first UK gigs at London's Marquee club in June 1987. The Cult, guided by future AC/DC producer Rick Rubin, made the transformation from goth heroes to a balls-out hard rock band with their 1987 album *Electric,* on which the opening track *Wild Flower* recycled the riff from AC/DC's *Rock 'N' Roll Singer*. And Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich proudly wore a *Back In Black* tour jacket given to him by his band's co-manager Peter Mensch, who had previously worked with AC/DC.

Angus being Angus, he wasn't going to make a song and dance about the band's resurgence. "We've never been the critics' love," he said. "The audience were always the critics to me. If a kid came up to me and said, 'I didn't like your show', that would break my heart. But if you make a record and your audience likes it, they buy it."

Angus had been around long enough to know how the music business worked, how fashions come and go, how bands rise and fall. He said he hadn't heard Guns N' Roses or Metallica. He was still listening to the same stuff he'd always loved – Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Muddy Waters. He reiterated the simple philosophy that had served AC/DC since their inception. "Rock music is what we do best, nice and loud and tough." But in the making of *Blow Up Your Video,* the band had made one significant change – and it would prove pivotal to the greater success that followed at the turn of the 90s.

AC/DC's 1983 album *Flick Of The Switch* had been produced by the band. 1985 follow-up *Fly On The Wall* by Angus and Malcolm Young. Neither album had been anywhere near as good or as popular as those they had made with the brilliant producer 'Mutt' Lange: *Highway To Hell, Back In Black* and *For Those About To Rock*.

AC/DC wised up with *Blow Up Your Video*. It marked the return of the production team that had worked on every AC/DC album from 1975 to 1978: Harry Vanda and George Young, the latter the elder brother of Malcolm and Angus. In this was a tacit admission. When AC/DC were making records, they needed an extra pair of ears – or in this case, two.

In 1988, Malcolm Young gave a rare interview for Japanese TV in which he noted the success of *Blow Up Your Video* in the same nonchalant manner as Angus. "There's still people out there that like us," he smiled.

Malcolm explained that the album's title was a wry comment on a generation of rock fans glued to MTV. "The idea was to get the kids out of their homes and down to the show. Don't watch TV – come and see the real thing." He also cocked a snook

MICHAEL UHL/REDFERNS/GETTY

Thunderstruck: rocking into the band's third decade.

NEWS LTD/NEWSPIX/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK/GETTY

at the big-haired rock bands of the period, principally Whitesnake. "David Coverdale's got success but he's had to become a pop singer to get it," he sneered. "There's always your glamour bands and your denim-clad groups. And you usually find out that your denim-clad groups are still surviving and the glam ones fade away."

Behind the scenes, however, Malcolm Young had his own problems. In May 1988 he was forced to step down from the North American leg of the *Blow Up Your Video* tour in order to undergo treatment for alcohol dependency. Standing in for Malcolm at those shows was his nephew Stevie Young, whose former band Starfighters had supported AC/DC in 1980.

"The funny thing was I never drunk heaps, I just drank consistently and it caught right up on me," said Malcolm in 2004. "Angus was going, 'I'm your brother; I don't want to see you dead here. Remember Bon?' So I took that break and cleaned myself up."

And shortly after the tour finished in November 1988 came a permanent change in personnel, when drummer Simon Wright was sacked and replaced by Chris Slade, a bald veteran who had previously been a member of Jimmy Page and Paul Rodgers' brief-lived supergroup The Firm.

What happened next was somewhat ironic given Malcolm Young's comments about "glamour bands". For AC/DC's 1990 album *The Razors Edge*, Malcolm and Angus again decided not to produce it themselves.

"ANGUS WAS GOING: 'I'M YOUR BROTHER, I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU DEAD, REMEMBER BON? SO I CLEANED MYSELF UP..." **MALCOLM YOUNG**

Only this time, in place of Vanda and Young, they enlisted the help of Bruce Fairbairn, whose previous work included hair metal classics *Slippery When Wet* by Bon Jovi and *Pump* by Aerosmith.

There were suggestions that AC/DC were selling out. In reality, they were simply getting the next best thing to Mutt Lange. *The Razors Edge* was the best sounding AC/DC album since *For Those About To Rock*. And it was front-loaded with three tracks even better than *Heatseeker*. *Moneytalks* has echoes of their jukebox classic *You Shook Me All Night Long*. *Fire Your Guns* has the breakneck speed and fury of *Let There Be Rock*. And best of all is *Thunderstruck* – a genuine all-time AC/DC standard that has remained a staple of the band's live set ever since.

The album did have weak spots – not least *Mistress For Christmas*, which is bad as its title suggests. And there were some negative reviews. *Rolling Stone* gave the album just two out of five stars and grumbled: "AC/DC sets a new record for the longest career without a single new idea." It was akin to beating a dog for licking its balls.

AC/DC: pure rock'n'roll.

But it didn't matter. *The Razors Edge* was another big hit, peaking at No.2 in the US and No.4 in the UK. And if any further confirmation were needed that AC/DC were once again at the top of their game, it came on August 17, 1991, when they returned to Donington Park to headline the Monsters Of Rock festival for the third time. Their performance was spectacular. And with Metallica playing second fiddle to AC/DC that day, there was another reminder of AC/DC's continuing influence on rock music. The *Metallica* album released just five days before Donington had both a sound and a cover inspired by *Back In Black*. Officially titled *Metallica*, it is better known as The Black Album.

Eleven days after Donington came an even bigger show – in fact, one of the biggest rock events ever staged. At Tushino airfield on the outskirts of Moscow, another Monsters Of Rock festival headlined by AC/DC drew an audience estimated at between 600,000 and two million. But for the members of AC/DC, *The Razors Edge* tour would also be remembered for the tragedy that occurred at their concert in Salt Lake City, Utah on January 18, 1991. During the show, three fans died in a crush near the stage. The father of one of the deceased subsequently filed a lawsuit against the band, alleging wrongful death. And although the band were later cleared of all charges, this remains AC/DC's darkest day since the death of Bon Scott in 1980.

In October 1992, an important chapter in the history of AC/DC was brought to a close by the release of a landmark album. Its title was prosaic: *Live*. But it was AC/DC's first live album featuring singer Brian Johnson, and its significance was not lost on Angus. "Brian's been with us a long time," Angus said. "He's recorded a lot of strong stuff, the *Back In Black* album especially, and *For Those About To Rock*, which still gives me goosebumps. Every kid I've met at our shows, the first thing they ask is, 'When are we getting another live album?' Well, now they've got it!"

By this time, the days of hair metal had long since passed. There was a new game in town: grunge. Nirvana had topped the US chart with *Nevermind*. Pearl Jam's *Ten* was also a multi-million seller. Angus hadn't heard them, of course. He was stuck on those same old records. "I still spend hours listening to the sound Chuck Berry's guitar makes," he said.

The world had moved on. The times and the fashions had changed. But not Angus Young. Not AC/DC. And that, more than anything, was the key to the band's remarkable longevity.

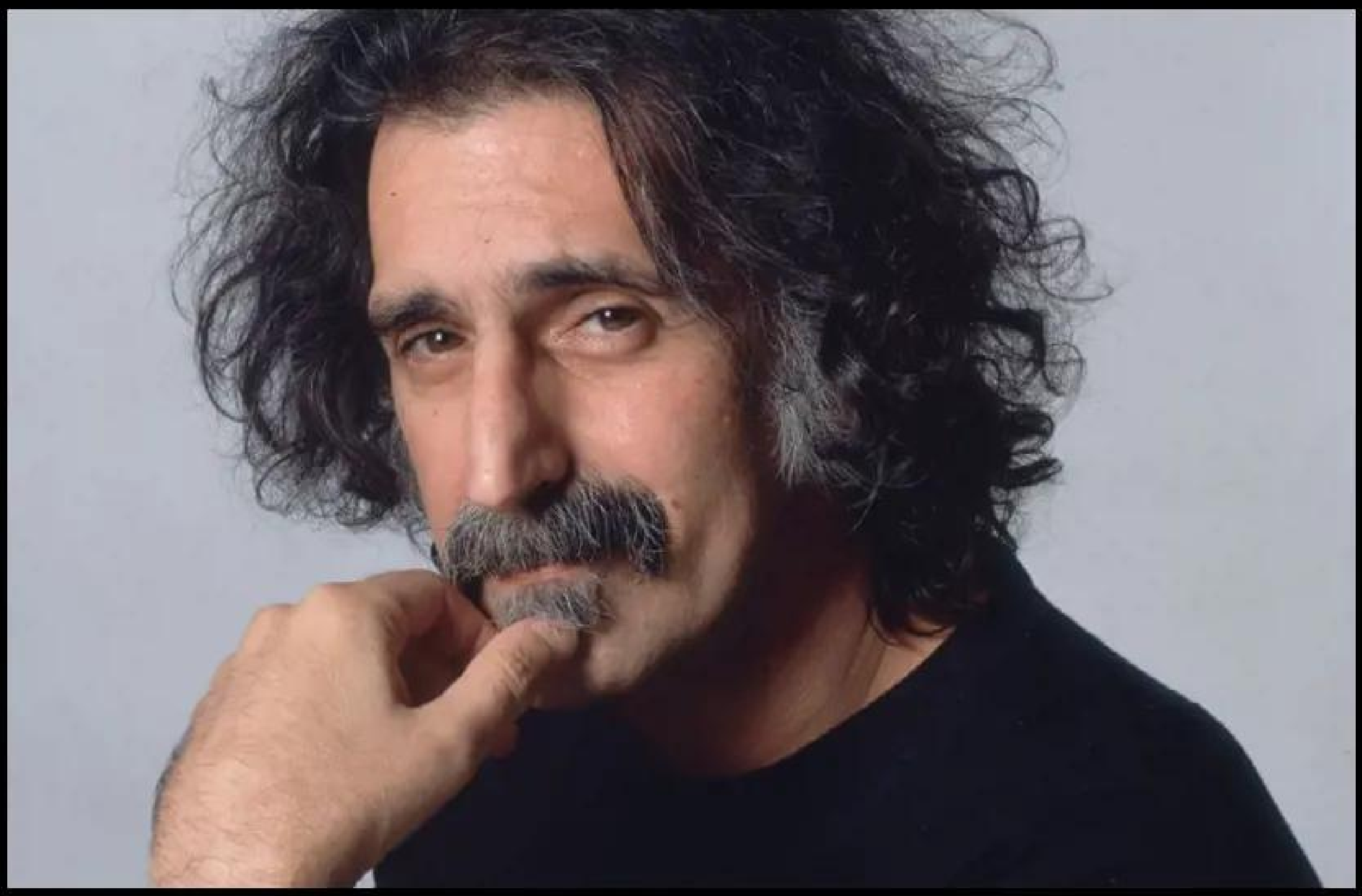
"The blues is the standard tempo in strip joints," Angus said. "And that's what we rely on too. Pure rock'n'roll isn't clean – it's nasty. It's pure energy."

And after all those years, there was still no better rock'n'roll band than AC/DC. Never was. Never will be.

1993 AC/DC MEET ZAPPA!

"FRANK LOVED R&B. AC/DC IS AN R&B BAND"

Frank Zappa's son **Dweezil** on his father's love of AC/DC and the tribute song they played on.



Frank Zappa: AC/DC fan.

Is it true that Frank was a fan of AC/DC?
Yeah. When we first travelled to Australia [in the early-70s] he tried to sign them. They ended up signing to Atlantic Records but he wanted them for his own label because he thought they were great.

What did he see in them?
I think he saw what everybody saw: they could play, they had a ton of energy and they were authentic. It was blues-based and it had an attitude. The thing about AC/DC is they've carved a massive career out of playing one style that's changed very, very little. That's what people love – that consistency. They're rock-solid and they have a great sound.

Your dad, on the other hand, made some of the most diverse music in rock.
Yeah, but he loved rhythm and blues, and AC/DC is essentially is a very heavy-duty, electrified rhythm and blues band.

In '93, Angus and Malcolm played on a song you wrote as a tribute to your dad.
It was for a piece of music that I wrote and it's pretty unique because as far as I'm aware I don't think they've played on anything except AC/DC material. But they did, for me – both of them. The piece is something called *What The Hell Was I Thinking*. It's a continuous piece of music that's 65 minutes long. Maybe it's best to describe it as an audio movie. There's a whole bunch of other guitarists that play on it, too – Brian May, Edward Van Halen, Eric Johnson, Steve Morse, Steve Vai, Joe Walsh, Robben Ford, Yngwie Malmsteen… there are probably 40 different guitarists on there, and there are bound to be several more before it's done because it's still not completed.

What was it like being in the studio with Angus and Malcolm? Would they take guidance?
Well, what they were playing in the context of this piece of music was right up their alley, so that wasn't really necessary. It's a very AC/DC-like thing because I wrote music that I wanted to hear certain guitar players play, whether it would be exactly what they were comfortable with or whether it would take them outside of their comfort zone. Angus and Malcolm are basically doing what they do, and the thing that's so cool about it is that Angus played six or seven different takes for his solo and every single one was very well crafted. I was blown away by his natural ability to phrase a solo and have it make sense from beginning to end, despite being improvised. He has a very specific approach to playing. In some ways it's very simplistic and in others it's extremely sophisticated. That's a great combination. And besides that, it has a really raw energy to it.

Presumably, you're a fan like your dad?
I've always been a fan of Angus Young. He was a big inspiration to me as a guitarist. he also one of the only other guitarists that plays a Gibson SG so I've always associated him by that guitar in the same way that I associated my dad with it. In fact on this tour we have actually played *Back In Black* a couple of times.

DICK BARNATT/GETTY INTERVIEW: DAVE LING

1995 ANGUS JAMS WITH TAJ MAHAL

"WE PARTIED DOWN"

Veteran bluesman **Taj Mahal** on laying down a "stream of consciousness rap" with AC/DC's guitarist

Taj Mahal: jamming with Angus.

It was sometime in '95 when me and Angus Young got together at Ocean Way Studio on Sunset Boulevard. We'd come up with a tune that was built loosely on an Albert King groove and I was actually doing some rapping over the top of it. I knew about him already, but he came in and just blistered this track. It was a great tune, but his contribution lifted it up even higher. He was just a fabulous player.

A lot of players are always quoting blues licks, but he seemed to have his own style. There were a lot of things about him that I really liked as a musician. He wasn't slavishly playing the same licks that he'd learned a long time ago, he was coming up with his own thing. In that respect, he was more like a jazz musician than some of the regular blues players.

I think we just recorded two tunes. There might've been a third one, but I don't recall much of that. I wasn't as happy with *44 Blues* as I wanted to be and we were thinking of going back into it, but we just moved on and started laying some raps in there. In fact, over the last few years I've been trying to see if I could excavate that recording and bright it into the light. And there's a strong possibility that something like that is going to happen now.

The rap was a stream-of-consciousness thing about a Christmas party that happened when I was 16 or 17. These hooligans from 30 miles down the line in Hartford – we were in Springfield – came in and a fight broke out over somebody's woman. The crazy thing was that the party was full of young kids, but the mother and one or two of her friends were in the kitchen, drinking liquor and keeping an eye on the boys who kept turning the lights out to snuggle with the girls. They were drinking gin and playing canasta, so I came up with something like, *'Everythin' goin' like a movie movin' faster/Mama's in the kitchen drinking gin and playin' canasta.'* So it was rap lyrics over the top of this groove that me and Angus had. That was basically where we left it, then we had to get on with our respective records.

Angus was full of laughs and serious at the same time. He was all about the music. I don't recall a lot of talking. He was excited about doing it and we were excited about having him. I also loved those shorts he always wore. That was classic, man. The only other guy who could get away with that was BB King, who used to go around in Bermuda shorts years ago.

GETTYX3

1994-5 AC/DC MEET RICK RUBIN

HARD AS A ROCK

As the mid 90s beckoned, AC/DC really needed a hit album. And how to acheive that? Simple. Just get the old drummer back, hang out with Arnie and get Rick Rubin on board…

Words: **Malcolm Dome**

Brian and Angus: breaking balls in the mid-90s.

GETTY

Ballbreaker, in many respects, was a landmark album for AC/DC. It saw them reunite with drummer Phil Rudd, and get in production guru Rick Rubin for assistance behind the desk.

Rudd, fired in 1983 after a personal dispute with Malcolm Young, had been back on the band's radar for a while. Chris Slade had proven to be a sturdy drummer in the five years he'd been with them – although he only featured on one album, *The Razors Edge*, but the Youngs felt they were missing that trademark Rudd approach. So, in 1994, he was invited along to several jam sessions, just to see how everything panned out. The result was a reconciliation and a return to the AC/DC fold. Cliff Williams was very pleased to have him back as a rhythmic partner, as he explained just after the album came out: "I love to play with Phil. The two drummers that took his place when he left us [Slade and, before him, Simon Wright] were good musicians but, with them, we just tried to copy what Phil did. There's just one Phil Rudd."

> *"WE WANTED DESPERATELY TO MAKE A GOOD ALBUM. WITH PHIL BACK, WE WERE A REAL BAND AGAIN."*
> **BRIAN JOHNSON**

Rubin, meanwhile, was known to be a huge fan of DC, and had been angling for years to work with them, and he finally got his chance when producing the song *Big Gun* in 1993 for the soundtrack to Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Last Action Hero* movie. Arnie even appeared in the promo video, decked in Angus' schoolboy gear. As Johnson recalled: "When he went into the caravan to change and came out dressed as Angus, I thought, 'Fuck, somebody left an airhose up Angus's arse while he was sleeping!'"

But there was a problem with Rubin as an album producer. "The making of the album was really hard," said Williams. "We started to record at the Record Plant Studios in New York, but didn't enjoy the experience. Many musicians told us, 'It's an excellent studio to record drum parts'. But we tried the drums in every room at the studio and couldn't get a decent sound. So, we wasted two months there. The only positive thing was that by then we knew every new song perfectly. Eventually, we relocated to Ocean Way Studios in LA."

Rubin proved to be a hard taskmaster as well, not prepared to settle for just anything. He had his expectations, and wasn't prepared to compromise. "Rick made us record every track about 50 times," explained Brian Johnson. "He was after the best possible dynamics. But we ended up keeping those takes which had real feeling. But that way of doing things was a bit disappointing, because I thought we lost a lot of our fire through playing those tracks over and over again."

The band were also used to recording the music as if playing live, with everyone gathered together in the same room. But on *Ballbreaker*, Rubin had the Young brothers and Williams in one room, while Rudd was in a different one, their only point of contact being that they could see one another through a window.

The album came out in September 1995, a full five years after *The Razors Edge* – the longest gap (until *Black Ice*, that is) that there had ever been between AC/DC studio releases. But it got to No.4 in the US charts and a very respectable No.6 in the UK, proving that AC/DC still had a unique cachet with fans. The reaction to *Ballbreaker* was strong, and five songs from it – namely *Hard As A Rock* (a No.1 single in the States), *Boogie Man, Cover You In Oil, Hail Caesar and Ballbreaker* – were staples in their live set during 1996. The power, streetwise sonicity and attitude of AC/DC were firmly in place, and despite Rubin's punctilious philosophy, they were still raw and hard.

"We wanted desperately to make a good album," Johnson said soon after *Ballbreaker* came out. "And that's what we got. With Phil back, we were a real band again."

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"ROBERT PLANT? BIT OF A POSER."

AC/DC were born to play live – but promoting their *Live* album was another matter. Interviewed in 1992, **Malcolm Young** looked back over his band's recorded history, from the electric *High Voltage* through to comeback album *The Razors Edg*e and beyond, taking in Bon Scott's death, balls and blond posers on the way.

Words: **Mark Blake**

In autumn 1992, I interviewed Malcolm Young for a now long-extinct music magazine called *Metal CD*. AC/DC were always a formidable live act, but studio-wise, they'd been in the doldrums for most of the 1980s (*Fly On The Wall*, anyone?). Then came 1990's platinum 'comeback' album, *The Razors Edge*. AC/DC were on the upswing again, but were as notoriously press-shy as ever.

It took several weeks and numerous phone calls to get the interview confirmed. Then, with 24 hours' notice, I was summoned to AC/DC's management office on London's King's Road. Here, I was ushered into a room where their rather debonair manager, Stewart Young (no relation), looked at me suspiciously, dialled Malcolm's home number in Sydney, Australia, and then, almost reluctantly, handed me the phone.

AC/DC were promoting a new live album, imaginatively titled *Live*. Malcolm had agreed to discuss every AC/DC album so far, and share some thoughts on the band. Best-laid plans…

The first sound Malcolm made down the line was a deep, phlegmy cough. I knew we were in trouble when he answered my questions about the first two albums with the same response: a very long pause, followed by, "That was a good one… A few good songs on that one."

By the time we reached their third UK album, *Let There Be Rock*, I felt like a dentist with his knee on a patient's chest, trying to extract a particularly obdurate wisdom tooth. Malcolm eventually sensed my discomfort. "Listen, mate," he sighed, in-between what sounded like puffs on a cigarette. "Can I be truthful? It was so long ago, I can't always remember which songs are on which records. You remind me and we can take it from there."

Great. Now we're getting somewhere. Okay, *Let There Be Rock*, then. You've got *Go Down*, *Dog Eat Dog*, the title track…? There was another achingly long pause, finally followed by, "That was a good one… A few good songs on that one."

In a desperate attempt to warm him up, I tried a different approach and asked Malcolm what bands he'd listened to while growing up. "The Stones and The Who," he replied, warming up a bit – from stone cold to tepid. What about these days? Another long pause: "The Stones and The Who… and that's about it."

Once again, he sensed my discomfort. "Me and Angus went to see Led Zeppelin once," he volunteered. Brilliant. Let's get him talking about that, I thought. But before I could ask for more details, he dropped the bombshell. "We left after a couple of songs." I was about to ask why, but Malcolm beat me to it: "Singer was a blond feller," he said, dismissively. "Bit of a poser."

By now, I could actually feel a comedy bead of sweat prickling my forehead. But we got through it. Slowly. At times it was like squeezing blood from an Ayers Rock-sized stone, but Malcolm gradually went from tepid to something approaching room temperature.

He was fiercely proud of AC/DC's legacy, sometimes self-critical and almost candid. He admitted taking time out of the band in 1988 after his drinking became an issue. In a sad portent of events following his 2014 diagnosis with dementia, he praised his nephew Stevie Young for stepping in back then.

As our time drew to a close, Malcolm almost sounded like he was enjoying himself. Almost. In 1991, AC/DC had headlined the Monsters Of Rock festival at Castle Donington for the third time. Over the years, they'd had Van Halen, Ozzy Osbourne, Whitesnake and Metallica as their warm-up acts. I reeled off their names in a last attempt to see if Malcolm had anything to say about AC/DC's rivals.

There was another painfully long pause. The silence between London and Sydney was deafening. Finally he spoke: "Seen a few of them bands on MTV."

Which ones? Another long pause: "Well, me daughter listens to *that* band…"

Yeah, which one? Another pause: "Nirvana" – which Malcolm pronounced as 'Neeeervana'.

Bingo! In 1992, Nirvana were the biggest band in the known universe. What, I wondered, did Malcolm think about Kurt Cobain and

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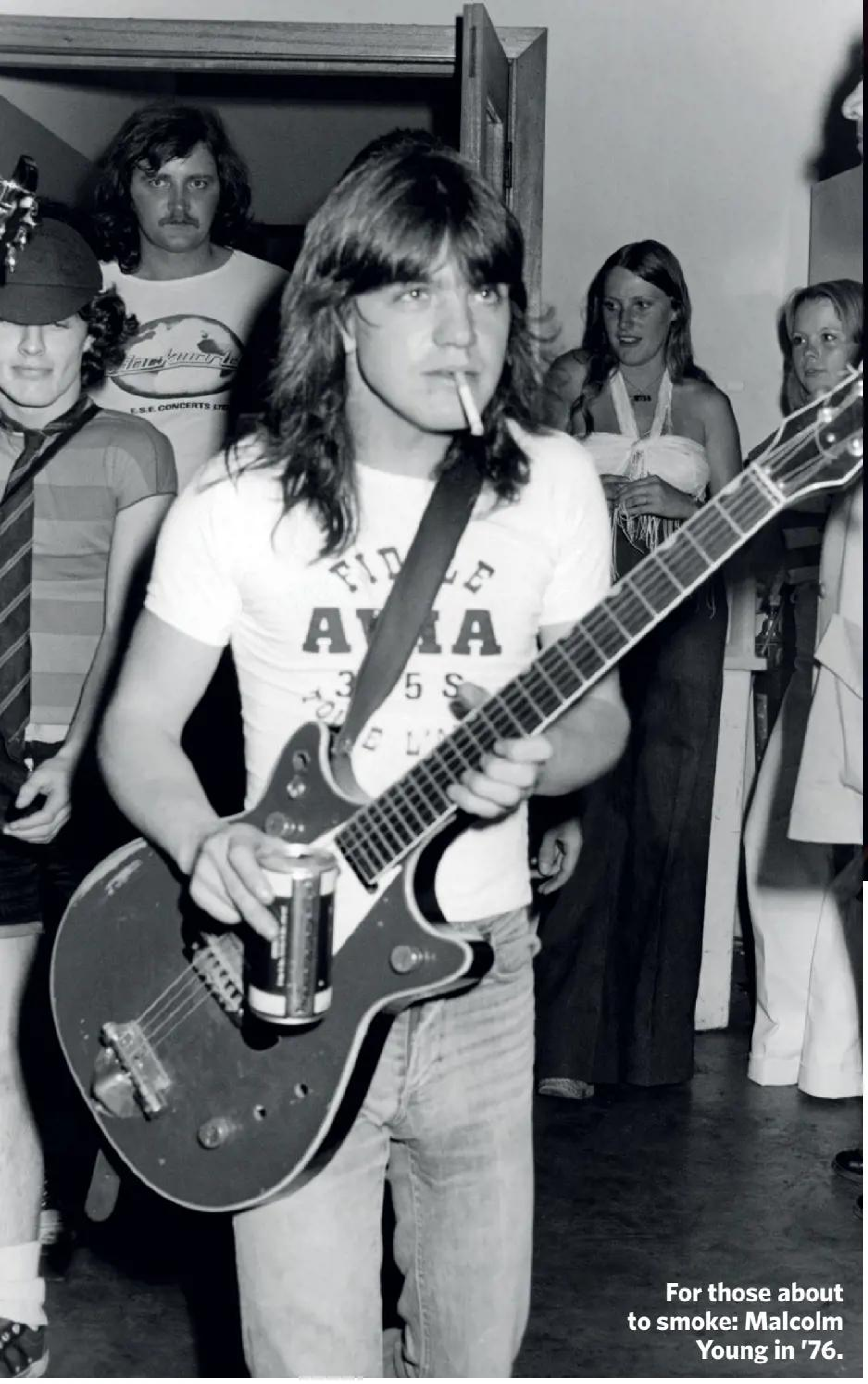
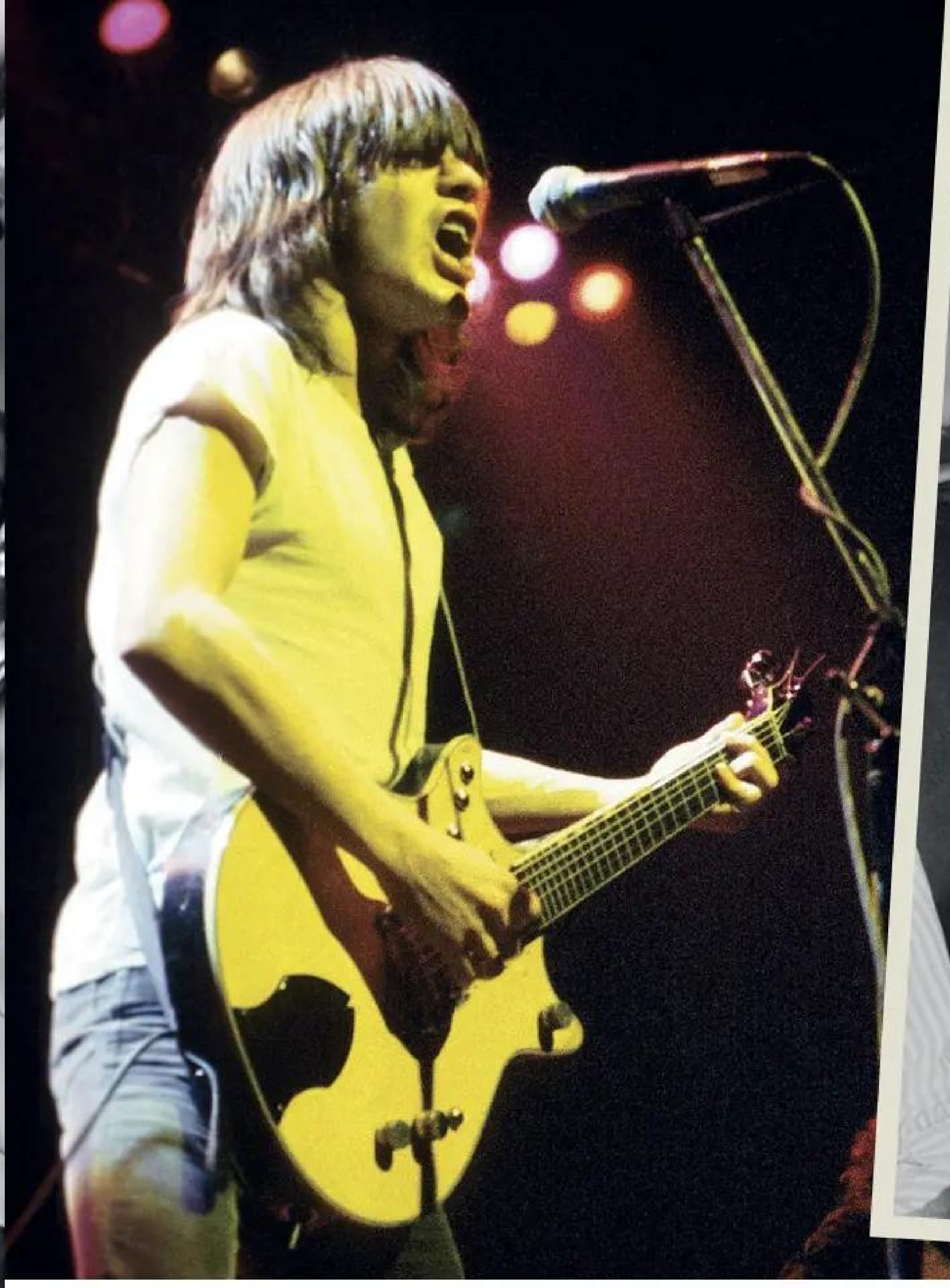


For those about to smoke: Malcolm Young in '76.



Have a drink on me: backstage at the Marquee, 1976.

> “WE THOUGHT A RIFF WAS A SONG. WE DIDN’T KNOW ANY BETTER.”
>
> MALCOLM YOUNG

Nirvana’s angst-fuelled take on heavy rock? Another long pause. “Naaaaah,” he finally replied. “Singer’s a blond feller. Bit of a poser.”

HIGH VOLTAGE

“The version that came out in Britain was a mix of songs from our first two Australian albums, *High Voltage* and *T.N.T.*. *T.N.T.* is a song that still goes over a storm every time we play it. It sounds like it could have come out today. D’you know there are bands out there still trying to write another *T.N.T.* today?

“*Live Wire* and *It’s A Long Way To The Top* came together almost immediately in the studio. When we played live in those days, we used to jam a lot on stage because we were so short of original material. We used to play *Jumpin’ Jack Flash* and put in 15 minutes of bullshit so we could fill up a 40-minute set. And the riffs for *Live Wire* and *It’s A Long Way To The Top* came out of those jams.

“Back then we never went into the studio with anything more than a riff. In fact, we thought a riff was a song. We really didn’t know any better.”

DIRTY DEEDS DONE DIRT CHEAP

“We didn’t have much time to do that album. After *High Voltage* we seemed to be touring constantly. Then we signed the record deal to go over to England and just as we’d completed the tour, they told us we had to do another album. All we did was go straight into the studio after doing the night’s gig and knock up some new ideas.

“It was Angus that came up with the song title – *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap*. It was based on a cartoon character that had the phrase as his calling card [Dishonest John in the TV cartoon *Beany And Cecil*]. Then Bon stuck in the line *‘I’m dirty, mean, mighty unclean’* from an advert for mosquito spray that was running on Aussie TV at the time. Yes, we were always a very topical band. We looked at what was happening in the world [laughing].

“*Big Balls* was the other one from that record that sticks in the mind. It was just a bit of a joke, a bit of fun. We needed to fill up the album, someone came up with a rumba or a tango, and Bon started writing these hilarious words. Bon loved an innuendo and he was obsessed with his balls.”

LET THERE BE ROCK

“Now this was a steamer! I suppose we were getting a bit more serious and we wanted to get a rawer sound and cut out those commercial choruses like *T.N.T.*. We knew exactly what we wanted, which were three really strong live tracks to flesh out the set.

“*Whole Lotta Rosie* was on that album, wasn’t it? We knew it was going to be a sure-fire winner, and *Bad Boy Boogie* and *Let There Be Rock* were the other two we felt would go the distance on stage. Those three overshadow most of the other songs on the album and ended up in the live set for years after.”

POWERAGE

“That album was more of the same, except our original bass guitarist Mark Evans had quit and Cliff [Williams] had joined. We were happy to stay in the same area as *Let There Be Rock* because all that stuff was going down so well on stage. *Sin City* was the big one on *Powerage*, and we’re still getting some mileage out of that even now.

“Mind you, the record company were starting to push us for hit singles, and we were just digging in our heels and going for it. We gave them *Rock’n’roll Damnation* though, and that made the charts. These days, some bands are expected to come up with at least eight singles off one album. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

IF YOU WANT BLOOD YOU’VE GOT IT

“*If You Want Blood* was exactly where we were at that stage in our career. That record summed the band up perfectly and it was recorded at one of the best gigs of that tour at the Glasgow Apollo. To tell you the truth, I haven’t actually listened to it for years, but I’ve seen clips of us on TV playing some of those songs and it reminded me of how good the band sounded at the time,

“*Whole Lotta Rosie* and *Let There Be Rock* were going down a treat by then, and of course we had the new version of *The Jack*, which had become really filthy, and was Bon’s party piece – his forte, if you like.”

HIGHWAY TO HELL

“That was a definitive change for AC/DC. Atlantic Records in America were unhappy because they couldn’t get the band on the radio, and they were desperate for us to come up with something more accessible. We’d had our own way for a few albums so we figured, let’s give them what they want and keep everyone happy.

“Back then, Mutt Lange was still an unknown – I think he’d just produced the Boomtown Rats before he came to us. Mutt seemed to know music, and he looked after the commercial side while we took care of the riffs, and somehow we managed to meet in the middle without sounding as though we’d compromised ourselves. In fact, there was no way we’d back down on anything. We were a pretty tough band for any producer to work for. *Touch Too Much* was a hit off that record, but the one song that stands head and shoulders over everything else was the title track.

“If certain people had got their way, though, it wouldn’t have been called *Highway To Hell*, because the bible belt was very strong in America at the time, and they made a fuss once the record came out. But even though we were under pressure, we stuck to our guns.

"After *Highway To Hell,* some of the critics started to realise that Bon did have a talent. Then, when he died, *everyone* was suddenly saying what a great performer he'd been. And these were the same guys that two years before had been saying we'd do much better with a singer that didn't scream all the time. They were saying we should ditch Bon and get someone like David Coverdale! What hurt me more than anything was that Bon never got the recognition due to him when he was alive."

BACK IN BLACK

"About three or four weeks before Bon's death [in February 1980], Angus and I had started putting some ideas together, and Bon had sat in playing the drums. Some of those ideas ended up on *Back In Black*. Then Bon died, and we didn't know whether we wanted to carry on. The record company was pressuring us to make a decision. Brian [Johnson] was recommended to us, and it felt right.

"But when Brian joined, the music papers were full of this Bon versus Brian debate, and Brian had a tough old time. I don't think Brian let it get to him. He comes from a traditional working-class background – his old man was in the pit, and he's a tough old nut to crack. At the end of the day, Brian had the balls to get up there, and he was the only guy we found who could sing loud enough to be heard over the racket the rest of us were making. He was always going to be our man, whether we liked it or not.

"THERE WAS NO WAY WE'D BACK DOWN ON ANYTHING."

MALCOLM YOUNG

"So, looking back on it, an awful lot of sweat went into the making of *Back In Black*. *Hells Bells* was one of the key songs. It reminded us of Bon and I think a lot of our older fans still see it as a tribute to him. That one, the title track and *Shoot To Thrill* are still in the live show, and I think they've joined some of the early songs as timeless AC/DC. Whatever it was, we were doing it right, because it was the most successful album we'd made at the time."

FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK (WE SALUTE YOU)

"Christ! It took us forever to make that record, and it sounds like it. It's full of bits and pieces and it doesn't flow properly like an AC/DC album should. There's some good riffs on there, but there's only one song we like, and that's the title track.

"When we wrote it, we wanted another big song to play live, like *Let There Be Rock*. *For Those About To Rock* has stood the test of time, and become our main encore. But by the time we'd completed the album, it had taken so long, I don't think anyone, neither the band nor the producer, could tell whether it sounded right or wrong. Everyone was fed up with the whole record."

4 X GETTY; LIVE: PHOTOSHOT

FLICK OF THE SWITCH

"We did that one so quickly and I guess it was a reaction to *For Those About To Rock*. We just thought, 'Bugger it! We've had enough of this crap!' Nobody was in the mood to spend another year making a record, so we decided to produce ourselves and make sure it was raw as it could be.

"We even had this very simple black-and-white line drawing on the cover. It was just pencilled on there. Everything about *Flick Of The Switch* was very basic. The title track is the song that still sticks in my mind from that record. *Flick Of The Switch* was a great live track."

FLY ON THE WALL

"We wanted to pick it up a bit more for this album, so we tried our hand at producing ourselves again. But putting some more time and thought into what we were doing instead of just taping ourselves banging out the songs as we had done on *Flick Of The Switch*.

"It's tough to pick one special song from *Fly On The Wall*, but *Shake Your Foundations* sounded great when we played it live. There had been another change in the band by then. Phil [Rudd] had left, and we had Simon Wright playing with us. He knew what he was doing and we just had to guide him in the right direction, and leave him to get on with the job. It's a very simple thing, playing drums for AC/DC, but sometimes it can be hard just to keep it simple."

WHO MADE WHO

"We were asked to provide the soundtrack music for the film *Maximum Overdrive*. There was some old stuff in there, like *Hells Bells*, as well as *Who Made Who*. We had the old [original producers] Vanda & Young back producing the title track, and I think that was what we needed. *Who Made Who* was a return to form for the band and it's become one of our most popular live tracks. We even used it as the opening song on our tour that year."

BLOW UP YOUR VIDEO

"We wanted to carry on where *Who Made Who* had left off, although there was a long gap between albums. We'd lost our footing by that time, and we needed to get the old feeling back again. So we stuck with Vanda & Young again, and went back to our roots. There was more production on the album than there had been on *Fly On The Wall* or *Flick Of The Switch*, and we tried to capture that traditional twelve-bar rock'n'roll sound that we'd had in the beginning.

"*That's The Way I Wanna Rock'n'Roll* and *Heatseeker* were the ones that went down best when we played them live, and they've stayed in the set. But I also liked *Meanstreak*, even though I think it may have been too funky for some of the fans."

THE RAZORS EDGE

"Bruce Fairbairn [the producer] is a real gentleman. He knew what we wanted to do and was happy to ride with us. We wanted to hear every single instrument on that record and have the overall sound right in your face. What we didn't want was one of those American mixes with eight guitar overdubs, but Bruce seemed to give the band a modern sound without watering us down.

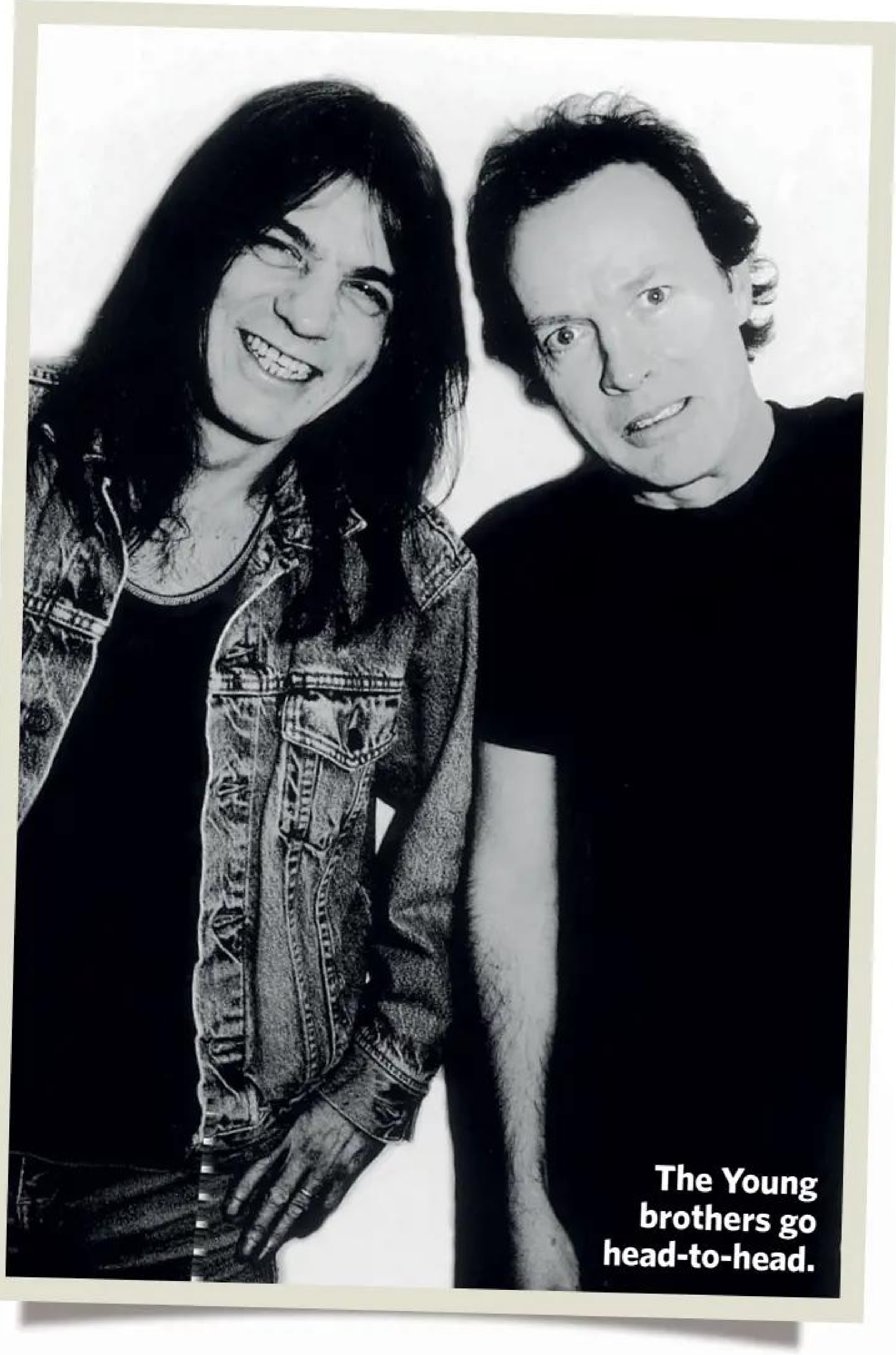
"Simon had left by then and we had Chris [Slade] in the band, which gave us an added boost. He's a showman in his own right, and I sometimes think we hold him back. *Thunderstruck* was the first single and it's ended up as the first song of the live set. It's one of those songs that sounds great on stage. *Fire Your Guns* is the same. Both of those were going down so well when we played them live."

LIVE

"Everyone said right from the start that AC/DC are a live band, and that the studio albums never matched us live. After *If You've Got Blood* and Bon's death, the question was always there – would we do another live album? We wanted to wait until we had enough live material with Brian to give him a fair old shot, so he wasn't up there singing all old Bon songs.

"Around the time of *For Those About To Rock*, we started to fill some of those big amphitheatres, and many bands playing the same venues were starting to put on a real show. People pay the same amount of money to see AC/DC as they do to see Genesis. But if they don't see any lights, any stage set, if all they get is five guys playing in the background, they're going to feel short-changed. It doesn't matter how good the music is, you have to present something the best way you can. People now expect the bell and the cannons when they go to an AC/DC show, and we're happy to give it to them.

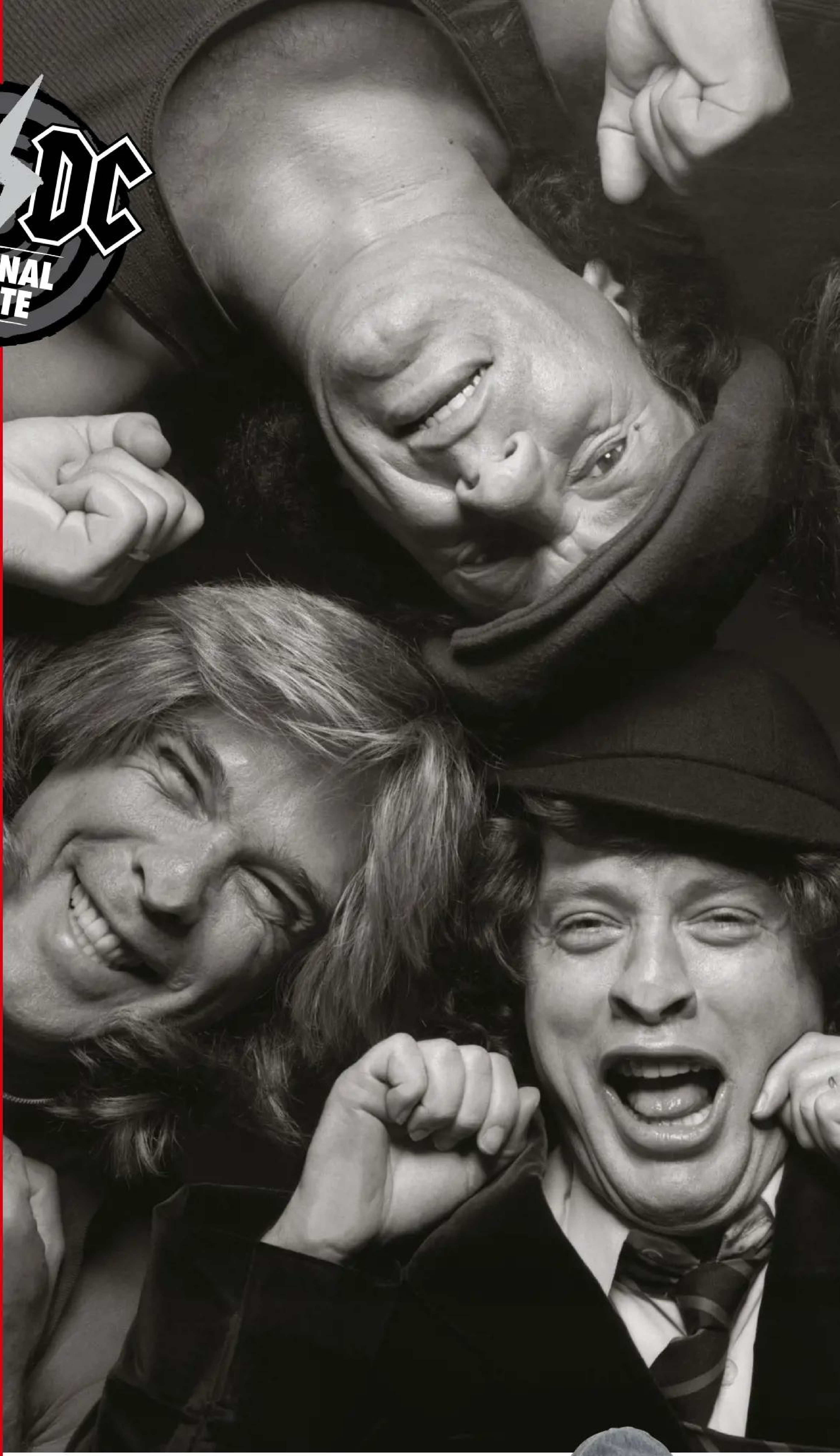
"This album has all the best AC/DC songs on it from both eras of the band. Some of the old stuff, like *Whole Lotta Rosie*, still has a real kick to it." ❼



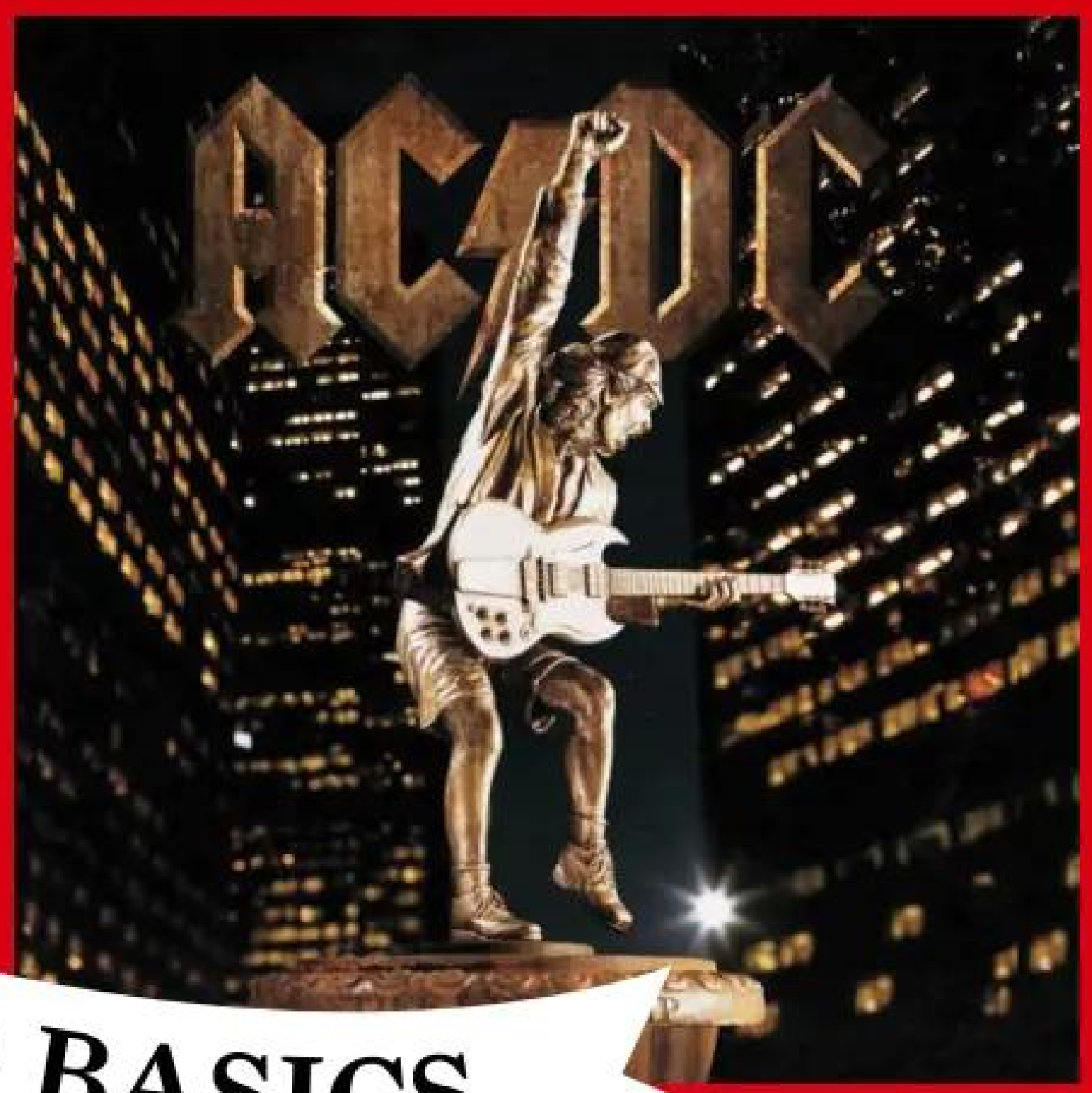
The Young brothers go head-to-head.

ROCK YOUR HEART OUT

AC/DC THE FINAL SALUTE



THE RAZORS EDGE 1990



BACK TO BASICS

BALLBREAKER 1995

STIFF UPPER LIP 2000

State-of-the-art stadium levellers, Rick Rubin mishaps and *'being born with a stiff'*. The 90s would see 'DC stripped back again.

Words: **Paul Brannigan**

February 1990, three months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, *Newsweek* magazine published a detailed analysis of the new German state in a cover story titled 'A United Germany: The New Superpower'. Among its findings was the revelation that the newly liberated population flooding across the crumbled wall had boosted West Berlin record sales by 300 per cent. And the preferred soundtrack for the newly emancipated masses? The *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack and AC/DC.

The Anglo-Australian quintet entered the new decade in rude health, buoyed by the success of *Blow Up Your Video*, their most commercially successful album since *For Those About To Rock*, and with de facto band leader Malcolm Young newly energised and clear-headed having shaken off the alcohol addiction which had forced him to sit out months of the band's subsequent world tour. "Angus was going: 'I'm your brother; I don't want to see you dead here. Remember Bon?'," Malcolm admitted. "So I took that break and cleaned myself up."

Big riffs, big record sales in post-Wall Berlin.

Living on the *Edge*: with new drummer Chris Slade, bottom right.

This renewed focus would be important. For with frontman Brian Johnson absent from songwriting sessions while finalising his divorce, and George Young relinquishing production work after an uncharacteristically unproductive session at Windmill Lane in Dublin, the onus was on Malcolm and Angus to reanimate the vibe when work resumed on AC/DC's eleventh studio album at Little Mountain Studio in Vancouver, Canada with producer Bruce Fairbairn. Choosing Fairbairn, who had revitalised Aerosmith's career with 1987's *Permanent Vacation* album, was inspired. At the outset the producer told Angus Young: "I want you to sound like AC/DC when you were seventeen."

Nowhere was that trademark sound captured better than on *The Razors Edge*'s opener, *Thunderstruck*. Introduced by an electrifying Angus Young riff, comprised of hammer-on and pull-off fingering on an open B string, the track builds dynamically using terrace chants and new drummer Chris Slade's brutal but simplistic poundings to emerge as a state-of-the-art stadium leveller. "AC/DC equals Power. That's the basic idea," Angus noted succinctly.

This simple premise was hammered home by *Fire Your Guns* and *Moneytalks*, the former built around a biting blues riff and classic single-entendre sex talk, the latter positioning Johnson as a sleazy Wall Street lothario (*'Hey little girl, you want it all/The furs, the diamonds, the painting on the wall'*) – instantly addictive, it remains AC/DC's highest-charting US single. The ominous-sounding title track, meanwhile, was that rarest of AC/DC songs, a rumination on global politics (*'There's fighting on the left and marching on the right…'*), as Angus Young explained to Canadian TV channel Much Music's news programme *FAX*. "The world was at peace again and everyone thought: 'Ah, the Berlin Wall's come down and it's gonna be a party every night'," the guitarist said. "And you can see now that it's not that way. It's our way of saying the world's not perfect and never will be."

“AC/DC EQUALS POWER. THAT'S THE BASIC IDEA.”

ANGUS YOUNG

Not everything on *The Razors Edge* was so striking. *Mistress For Christmas*, inspired by Donald Trump, then making tabloid headlines for an extra-marital liason with US actress Marla Maples, might be the single worst song the band have ever recorded, while you'd be hard pressed to find a single 'DC devotee who could sing you the chorus of *Goodbye & Good Riddance To Bad Luck* or the frantically funky *Rock Your Heart Out*. But, kicking off a decade that would see words such as 'grunge', 'nu metal' and 'pop-punk' enter the rock lexicon, *The Razors Edge* stands as AC/DC reclaiming their title of the world's greatest hard rock band in the post-*Appetite For Destruction* landscape, with a hard-hitting, back-to-basics album.

This approach was to underpin AC/DC's return to the studio in 1994, to an almost parodic extent. Having helped The Cult pay homage to 'DC and Zeppelin with that band's 1987 album *Electric*, Def American record label boss Rick Rubin had fulfilled a lifelong dream by working with AC/DC in 1993 on *Big Gun*, a track written for Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Last Action Hero* film – "He said he'd been an AC/DC fan since he was a kid in New York," Malcolm Young said – and his services as producer were retained for *Ballbreaker*. This, Young would later concede, was a mistake.

The sessions began with the finest intentions, with Rubin promising to restore the classic sound of the band's earliest recordings. "It sounds simple," the producer told *Rolling Stone* magazine, "but what AC/DC did is almost impossible to duplicate." With Phil Rudd surprisingly reinstated alongside Cliff Williams, it seemed that the planets had aligned perfectly, and Angus was optimistic as sessions began at New York's Power Station studio. "He's probably the first producer that's never said 'I want a hit single', so that's good, because then you know you're going to make an album, not ten songs for radio, for commercial reasons," he explained.

Problems bedevilled the sessions from day one. Try as they might, Rubin, engineer Mike Fraser and Rudd could not get a perfect drum sound, and after 10 frustrating weeks – during which 50 hours of recordings were made that would never see the light of day – operations shifted to LA's Ocean Way Studios, where Rubin had wanted to record from the outset. The new schedule, however, came with new issues, because Rubin was also contracted to work with the Red Hot Chili Peppers on their new album, *One Hot Minute*, meaning he would have to divide his time. Used to having their producer's undivided attention, this time-share arrangement did not sit well with the Young brothers. Even less so when they realised that upon showing up at 6pm, Rubin's studio regime would then involve recording songs up to 50 times.

"He would come in at night and say: 'Hmm, we'll try that song a different way tomorrow,'" recalled Brian Johnson. "By the time we finished we'd played the song so many different times you'd be sitting there going: 'Jesus, I'm sick of this bloody thing.'"

To Rubin's credit, when *Ballbreaker* emerged in September 1995 it sounded fantastic, as warm and inviting as the hum of a vintage valve amp. But it contained no truly great songs. Lairy opener *Hard As A Rock*, with its staccato riff and ludicrously priapic lyrics (*'Her hot potatoes, will elevate ya'*) is the pick of the bunch, while the closing title track was as agreeably filthy as anything from *Dirty Deeds* (*'She threw me on the bed, her hand went for my throat/As I began to choke: "Honey shoot your load!"'*) but almost everything in-between is the definition of 'filler'. Save for a curious meditation on religious fundamentalism with *Burnin' Alive*, based on the Branch Davidian cult siege in Waco, Texas, *Ballbreaker* is hilariously over-obsessed with sex, to the point where Angus and Malcolm's cringeworthy lyrics actually distract from some fine old-school riffs. It was unlikely to be much consolation to the Youngs that *One Hot Minute* turned out to be a stiff too.

Reunited with George Young, and back in Vancouver, although at Bryan Adams's Warehouse Studio this time, AC/DC restored the balance between authenticity and quality with 2000's *Stiff Upper Lip*. A much more nuanced, less wildly excitable affair than its predecessor, the album tapped into the band's oldest inspirations – Chuck Berry riffs, ZZ Top boogie, Muddy Waters' electric blues – to fashion a record that could almost be described as 'mature'. Almost. Any album that begins with the heroically dumb lyric *'I was born with a stiff'* isn't going to be entirely house-trained, but on tracks such as the rolling *House Of Jazz*, the sweetly choogling *Safe In New York City* and the down-'n'-dirty *Satellite Blues*, they harnessed some of the same understated, controlled power that they'd invested in *Powerage*. Here, crucially, AC/DC pulled off the trick they'd mastered during the Bon Scott years, of making a whole lot of preparation and hard work sound effortless.

When pressed to make sense of AC/DC's ongoing relevance as the new millennium began, Malcolm Young offered an explanation as simple as his trademark breeze-block riffing. "If you look at The Beatles, they started out as a rock'n'roll band, playing in Hamburg," he noted. "They became really successful. And then they started doing things like *Sgt. Pepper* and *Magical Mystery Tour*, but eventually they came back to playing straightforward rock'n'roll like *Get Back*. The Stones did much the same. We've learned from bands like that that it's best just to stay where you're at; you're going to come back there anyway, so why leave in the first place?"

And who could argue with that?

ANGUS: MICK HUTSON/GETTY; GROUP: TERRY O'NEILL/GETTY

INSIDE THE AC/DC 'MAFIA'

DOG EAT DOG?

Following ther successes of the early 80s, AC/DC closed the door and shut out the world at large. And woe betide anyone who got on the wrong side of them.

Words: **Mick Wall**

"Validation." That was the word Bon Scott used in the winter of 1979 when I asked what he thought the main thing was that success had brought him.

We were sitting in a dingy bedsit in West London, smoking a joint. By then AC/DC's *Highway To Hell* album was riding high in the charts on both sides of the Atlantic, yet it was pretty clear that whatever new fame and money success had brought him, Bon remained essentially unmoved.

"I like a drink, a smoke, a good time," he said. "But I always did. This…" he said, waving a hand at whatever vague, intangible idea of 'success' I might be referring to, "this just means I must have been doing something right all this time people said I was doing wrong."

Tragically for Bon Scott, the "living easy, living free" ethos, as expounded in *Highway To Hell*, that success now validated for him, would result in his booze-and-drugs-related death in just a few months.

For the rest of AC/DC too – specifically their founding members and leaders, guitarist brothers Malcolm and Angus Young – the validation of success would have far-reaching consequences. Not in their deaths, but in their prolonged, near-fatal withdrawal from the world they had now begun conquering.

The tipping point had come at the end of 1981 with the release of *For Those About To Rock We Salute You*. The success of its predecessor, *Back In Black* – success they'd long strived for – allowed them to slam shut the gates and pull up the drawbridge on the outside world.

"Once the band had made it – *really* made it – everything changed," observes Ian Jeffery, their tour manager at the time. "And you were either with them, behind those gates, or you were completely shut out. You didn't matter. And that's how it stayed."

For the Young brothers, it was always 'us against the world'. Two of eight children born in the post-World War II years on a Glasgow council estate, they had emigrated to Australia, where they'd grown up as the kids with 'funny accents'. From the start, they were a two-man clan.

"They didn't trust anybody, not even me," says Michael Browning, the manager who helped steer them through the 70s. "Even though I'd given them money and helped them out, I still had to be grilled by their older brother George before I could convince them I was the guy for the job."

Indeed it was George Young – whose earlier band The Easybeats had been 'the Australian Beatles' in the 60s, before being left for dead and heavily in debt by a crooked and uncaring music business – who had instilled in Malcolm and Angus a deep suspicion of outsiders.

That approach stood them in good stead during the 70s. But by the early 80s they were starting to close ranks and purge their inner circle. Michael Browning was fired after *Highway To Hell* and left out in the cold ("It was like I never existed," he says now). His replacement, Peter Mensch, went five days after their appearance at the 1981 Monsters Of Rock festival (according to Ian Jeffery, Malcolm thought Mensch was getting "too big for his boots"). Most shocking of all was the decision to end their relationship with Mutt Lange, the man who had played a huge part in their international success. The party line was that Lange was too slow. "He'd need forever to get anything done," Angus Young told *Classic Rock* in 2011. "Otherwise it'd have been in and out in a week, I'd say."

Ian Jeffery says the reason for Lange's expulsion from the inner circle was more prosaic. "It was a period when the brothers were questioning everything. Malcolm was like, 'What the fuck are we paying this guy all this money for? We can fucking do it.'"

According to the people who know him, Malcolm Young was, and is, more than just AC/DC's rhythm guitarist – he's the man who has run the band with a rod of iron from the start.

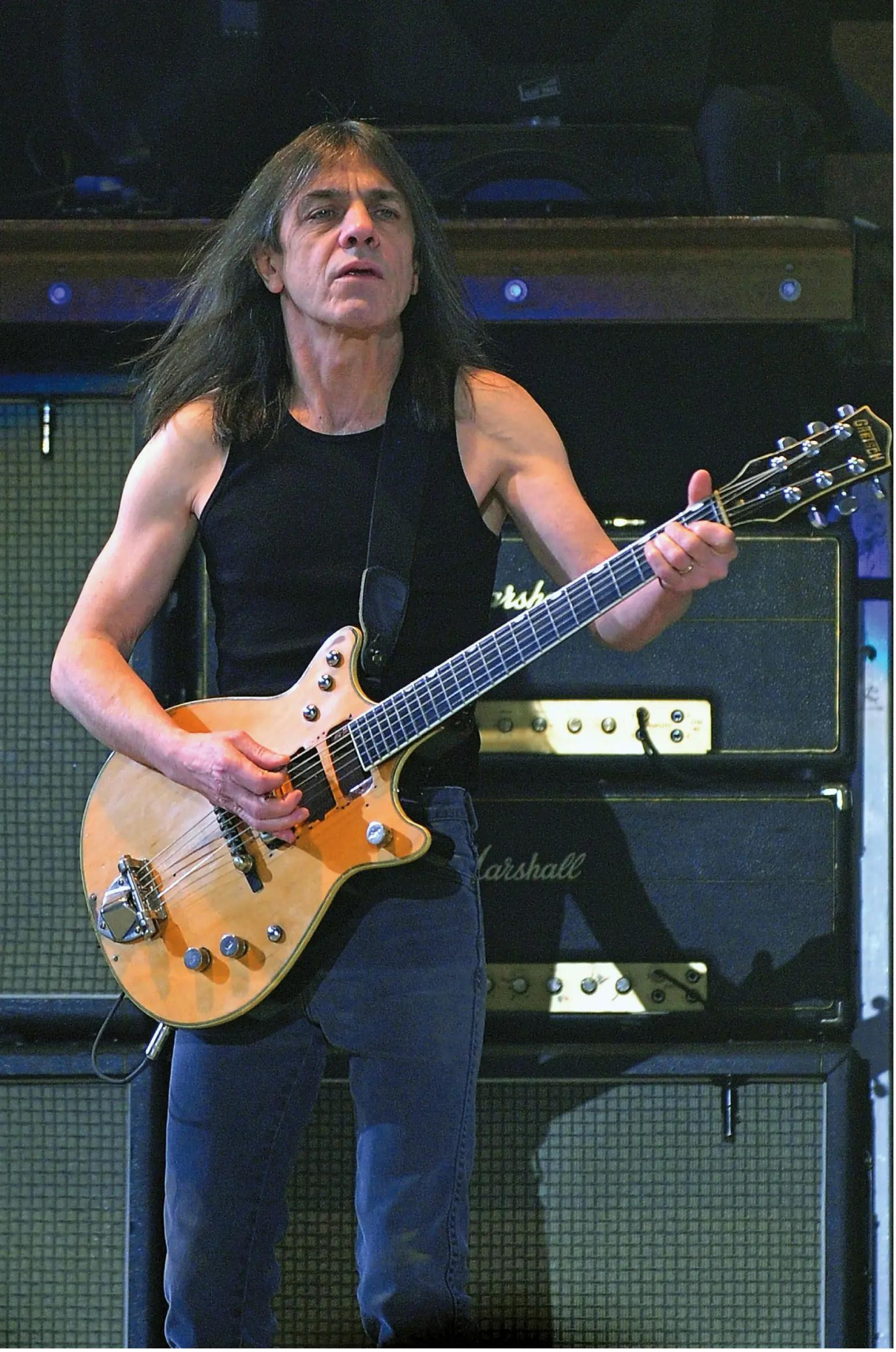
"The band belonged to Malcolm," says Ian Jeffery. "It was Malcolm who told [drummer] Phil Rudd to stick to the beat; Malcolm who told [bassist] Cliff [Williams] where to stand and when to come to the mic. When Brian [Johnson] joined, it was Malcolm that told him to shut the fuck up between songs and just stand there and sing. It would always be Malcolm, every direction or turning they took."

Jeffery was employed as AC/DC's manager following Mensch's dismissal, though it was largely a titular arrangement. By the mid-80s the band were taking care of their own business. "I dealt with anyone they didn't want to talk to, which was most people," he says. "I never made any big decisions, I always reported back to Malcolm and Angus and let them decide what they wanted to do."

> *"ONCE THE BAND MADE IT, EVERYTHING CHANGED. YOU WERE EITHER WITH THEM OR SHUT OUT."*
> ***IAN JEFFERY.***

Below: The Easybeats, with George Young, right.

GETTY



MORENA BRENGOLA/REDFERNS/GETTY

Malcolm Young in 2008: "The band belonged to him," says Ian Jeffery.

These decisions weren't always for the best. Possibly the worst of all was to split from Lange after *For Those About To Rock*. On their two subsequent albums, 1983's *Flick Of The Switch* and 1985's *Fly On The Wall*, production was credited to the band and Malcolm and Angus respectively – final proof that the Young brothers now called the shots. Artistically they were the two poorest albums of AC/DC's career. Commercially they were flops compared to the big beasts that were *Back In Black* and *For Those About To Rock*. When that happened, the brothers looked around for someone to blame. This time it was Ian Jeffery on the receiving end. He was fired within weeks of the album's release.

"[Malcolm] said: 'We don't need you any more,'" says Jeffery. "I asked what he meant. He said: 'We don't need you any more. We're done', and walked out the door. That was it."

The end of the 80s saw AC/DC back on an even keel, even if the wall around them had grown so high that not even their record label's president, Doug Morris, was allowed to speak directly to them. The only ones allowed into the inner sanctum were the band's New York-based lawyer, John Clark, and accountant, Alvin Handwerker.

Whatever the internal machinations, Malcolm Young's single-minded vision and innate stubbornness had come full circle, and albums such as 1990's *The Razors Edge* and 1995's *Ballbreaker* re-established AC/DC as one of rock's biggest acts.

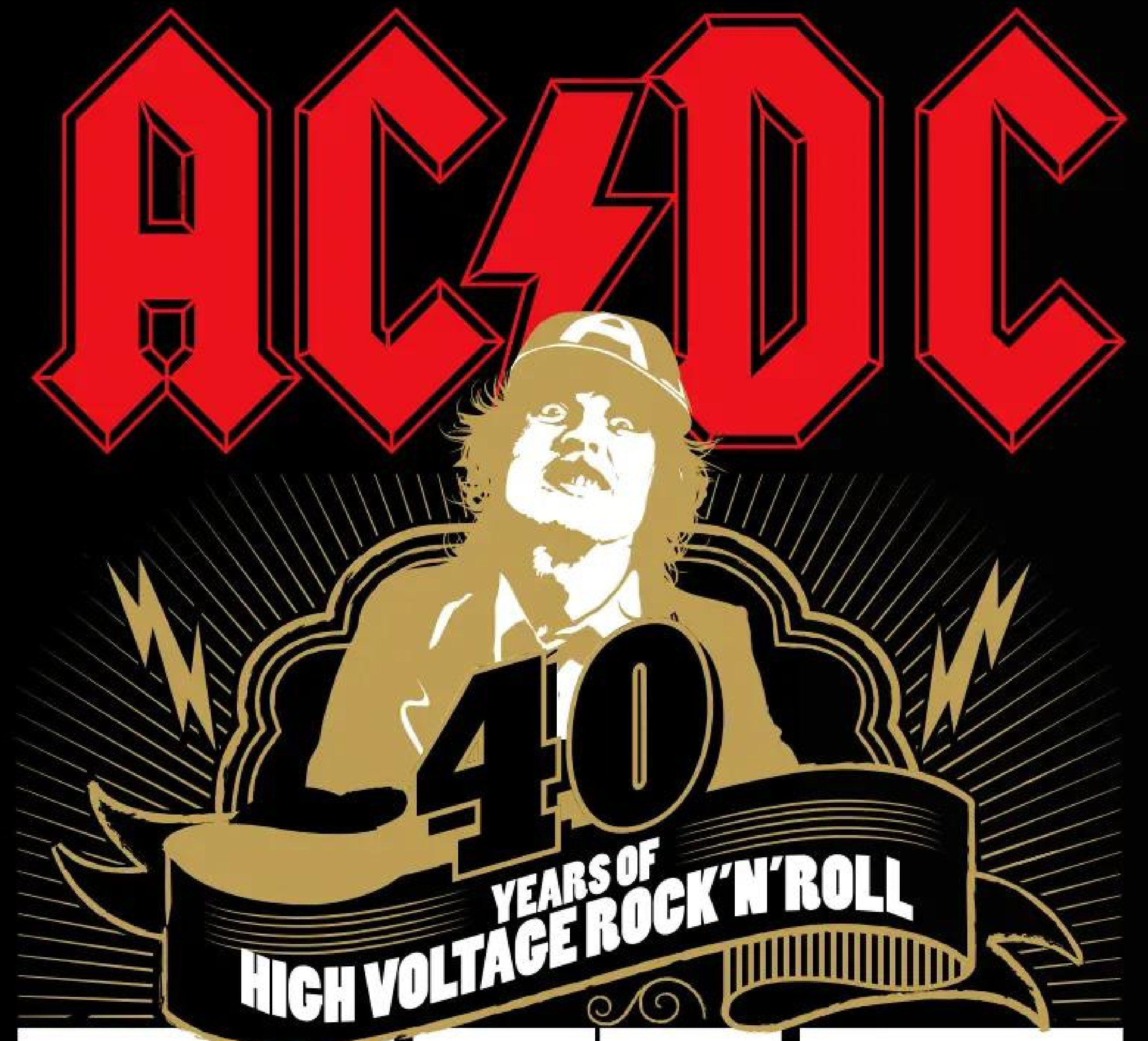
There were still casualties of the Young clan. Manager Stewart Young (no relation) had played a part in bringing the band back from the brink of career suicide in the late 80s, helping them through Malcolm's "year off" as he battled alcoholism, only to receive a phone call from Alvin Handwerker in the mid-90s saying the band didn't want to work with him any more. Even Rick Rubin, the long-time AC/DC fan who'd produced *Ballbreaker*, found himself frozen out after the band clashed with him in the studio.

"They're extremely clannish," says Derek Shulman, the former A&R man who headed up AC/DC's label, Atco, in the early 90s and helped re-establish them as a major force. "You're either totally in or you're totally out. The inner circle is extremely close-knit, very family-oriented, and you have to have their trust, and they have to believe you're not bullshitting, because they can see through that stuff."

The band haven't just cut the world off from them, they've cut themselves off from the world as well. One former employee of their production company, Albert, recalls having a conversation with Malcolm about Metallica, who had recently played with AC/DC. Malcolm scratched his head and said, in all seriousness: "Yeah, I think I've heard of them. They're supposed to be good, are they?" It's only recently that AC/DC acceded to the march of technology and allowed their songs on iTunes (they're still not on Spotify). In the absence of information about their personal lives, rumours have sprung up over the years. The best one is that Angus owns a tulip farm in Holland with his Dutch wife (a claim he has refuted).

These days the band still have the inscrutable Alvin Handwerker overseeing their business affairs from a private office in New York, but the wall surrounding AC/DC is as high as ever, with information tightly controlled. In February 2009, seven shows had to be cancelled or postponed, with no explanation. Only some months later did Brian Johnson admit that he had been diagnosed with Barrett's syndrome, a condition that affects the oesophagus and which, if left untreated, can lead to cancer. Last year, rumours circulated that one member of the band was seriously ill, though no name was mentioned – and hasn't been since. In the world of AC/DC, things work on a need-to-know basis. And the rest of the world generally doesn't need to know.

"At the end of the day, when the big decisions came down," says Ian Jeffery, "Malcolm is the guy who really thinks about things and gets the results." ❼



THE '00s

A meeting with Joe Strummer... A 40-foot Angus... The 9/11 'safe' list... The AC/DC 'Mafia'... A triumphant return... A giant rock'n'roll train... Their own stage at Download...

1999-2001 STIFF UPPER LIP

CAN'T STOP ROCK'N'ROLL

By the late 90s, rock music was going through the doldrums. And AC/DC had been suspiciously quiet for a few years. What the world really needed was their high-voltage return...

Words: **Ken McIntyre** Portrait: **Mick Hutson**

Look back at the state of the Rock Nation in 1999 and you may shudder and wince in disgust. They were truly dark and desperate times – a world where nu metal held sway over the masses, where Guns N' Roses, AC/DC and Black Sabbath were abandoned for the likes of Disturbed, Papa Roach, Korn and Insane Clown Posse, when the closest thing to stereotypical 'classic rock' on the charts was the Goo Goo Dolls. As the 60s had with Altamont, so the 90s had with Woodstock 99, a fiasco of blood, rape, chaos, fire… and Limp Bizkit. In 1999, everything was awful. It was the year the riff died.

Well, almost. Amid this cacophony of aggro-disco and syrup-rock, one flaming beacon of hope arrived in the guise of a skinny, thick-lipped motherfucker howling about being on a plane, on cocaine. Out of nowhere, Buckcherry's *Lit Up* stormed the airwaves and gave hope to old-skull rockers pining for the halcyon daze of bad boy boogie. Brazen AC/DC revivalists ever, this formerly unknown clutch of swaggering degenerates from LA almost single-handedly kick-started the sputtering heart of rock. Now it just needed a good dose of the hard stuff to get back on its feet. If ever there was a time for AC/DC to wake from their fitful slumber, it was now. But where the hell were they?

Their last album was 1995's *Ballbreaker*. Produced between yoga sessions by eccentric/mad genius Rick Rubin, it was a thick, meaty, dry-smoked slab of prime riffola, one that found AC/DC's long-lost drummer Phil Rudd back in the fold, reunited the classic 70s era line-up. Fired-up and shooting to thrill, the band hit the road and slayed stadiums from one end of the Earth to the other for the next year. And that's where the trail ended. By the end of 1996, the band retired to whatever holy mountain rock gods recline in. And while they snoozed, rock'n'roll went to hell.

That's the thing with heroes, though. Eventually, they always save the day. After spending a couple of relatively lightweight years putting together the definitive Scott-era box set *Bonfire*, AC/DC decided it was time to make a new record. In July 1999, the band convened at Warehouse Studios in Vancouver to work on their 13th album, *Stiff Upper Lip*. It was produced by Angus and Malcolm's older brother George, who last worked with them on 1988's *Blow Up Your Video*. It was no surprise to see George back, really, considering the comical debacle of the *Ballbreaker* recording sessions, when Rubin would lie on the floor and demand fifty takes of the same riff. It was all too much for the no-nonsense band. "Rick Rubin is not a rock'n'roller, that's for sure," Malcolm told *Guitar World* in 2008. "We would never go back to him. We thought he was a phony."

Brian Johnson was equally happy to see Brother George back behind the mixing board. "There was a wonderful feeling of light-heartedeness, a devil-may-care attitude," he said, when describing the recording of *Stiff Upper Lip*. "The lads just said 'Fuck it, sing how you want to'." Angus felt that having George back brought them closer to their ramshackle roots. "In the old days we'd finish a gig at about two in the morning and then drive down to the

> *"THERE WAS A WONDERFUL FEELING OF LIGHT-HEARTEDENESS, A DEVIL-MAY-CARE ATTITUDE..."* **BRIAN JOHNSON**

Back in... bronze? AC/DC onstage in 2000.

studio," he said. "George and Harry [Vanda] would have a couple dozen cans in and a few bottles of Jack Daniels, and we'd have a party and rip it up. It was the same loose feeling like we were onstage still. The studio was just an extension of the gig back then."

The sessions lasted four months. All the songs were written by Angus and Malcolm. Holy Joe Strummer popped in during the sessions to say hello, but sadly, there's no sonic document to memorialize this high-profile blues/punk summit. Otherwise, it was business as usual. As Angus told *Rock 2000* shortly after the album's release: "The only thing that changes on a new AC/DC record is the cover."

Stiff Upper Lip did lean heavier on the blues than previous efforts, with songs like *Satellite Blues, House Of Jazz* and *Come And Get It* plodding along like a middle-aged blues-rock bar band, but blazers like *Safe In New York City*, *Can't Stand Still* and the rip-snorting title track delivered the crunch fans were clamouring for.

Spoofing Angus Young's golden-god status, *Stiff Upper Lip*'s cover sported a bronze statue of the diminutive riff wrangler. Naturally, when the band hit the road in August of 2000 to support the record, they brought a 40-foot high replica with them. And what a performer enormo-Angus was, growing horns, blowing smoke, and eventually exploding nightly in an orgy of fireworks during the climax of Angus's *Let There Be Rock* solo.

The shows were largely triumphant, marred only by an unfortunate incident in Belgium on the first stop of the European leg of the tour, when an over-zealous fan fell from the balcony during the final encore, dropping 17 metres onto the concrete floor. He later died in the hospital.

"IN THE OLD DAYS, WE'D FINISH A GIG AT TWO IN THE MORNING, THEN HEAD BACK TO THE STUDIO AND RIP IT UP." **ANGUS YOUNG**

As for sales, *Stiff Upper Lip* was not a huge hit, at least not for AC/DC – it went platinum, just like all their records, but it didn't top the charts in the UK, the US or even Australia. Of course, AC/DC were aware of the dire state of rock'n'roll and the uphill battle they faced, as evidenced by Brian Johnson's eye-roll when the band played at MTV's studios to support the record. "Imagine us, in the hallowed halls of hip-hop," he quipped.

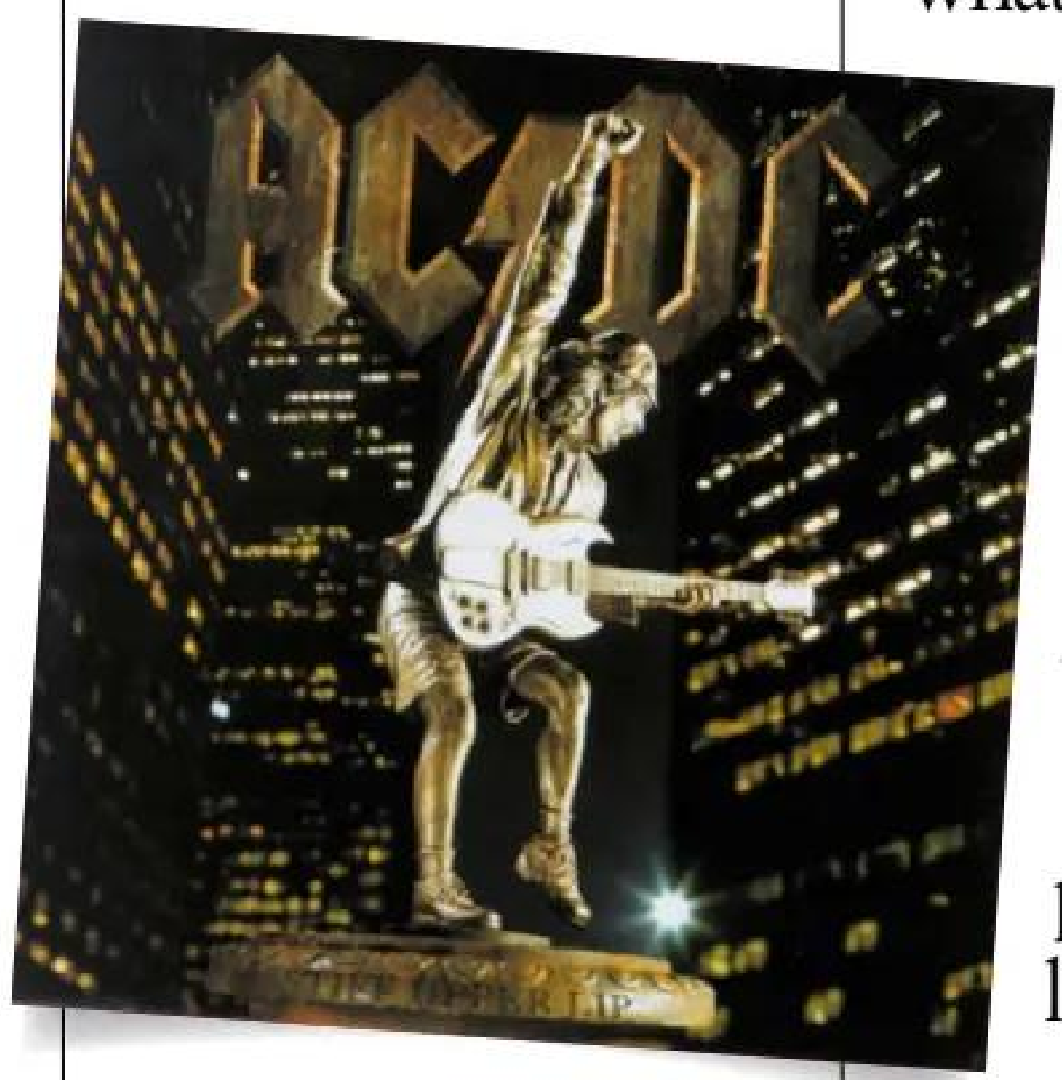
Still, *Stiff Upper Lip* got the job done, and brought AC/DC back into the limelight. The shows were packed, the band was in top form, and rock'n'roll was back. At least until the world ended a year later.

Shortly after the tragic events of September 11, 2001, a semi-official 'no play' list created by radio conglomerate ClearChannel circulated around US radio stations, ear-marking songs deemed too insensitive to play in the wake of the fall of the Twin Towers. Everything from The Gap Band's *You Dropped A Bomb On Me* to Billy Joel's *Only The Good Die Young* were dropped.

AC/DC were singled out as repeat offenders, with seven songs on the dreaded list, including *Shot Down In Flames*, *TNT*, *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* and, inevitably, new song *Safe In New York City*. Just as in the 80s, during the height of the PMRC's war against rock, AC/DC found themselves the unwitting centre of political controversy.

In all probability, the band probably never even noticed, just as they were doubtless unaware of the fact that rock was enjoying a resurgence courtesy of The Strokes, The Whites Stripes and a whole flotilla of other bands who made no secret of their love of AC/DC - The Datsuns, The Hellacopters, Turbonegro and virtually every band in Scandinavia.

So, having helped save rock from itself, what did our heroes do next? They took it easy, mostly. Phil Rudd moved to New Zealand and produced local bands at his studio. Cliff Williams gigged around Croatia with a band he'd befriended, Frozen Camel. Malcolm lived the quiet family life back in Sydney. Angus spent time at home with his wife in Holland, painting landscapes. Brian Johnson lived it up in his adopted hometown of Sarasota, Florida, racing sports cars and co-writing a stage production about Helen Of Troy. There was no sense of urgency, no worries that they'd be toppled, forgotten, or left for dead.



If *Stiff Upper Lip* proved nothing else, it showed that AC/DC could get up off the couch at any time, in five years, seven, or fifteen, and still pack arenas, still deliver an album's worth of raging hard rock, and still inspire skinny young turks to shoplift Gibson SGs and start their own bands.

They would do it all again, eventually, with 2008's *Black Ice*. But for now, AC/DC were content to live the easy life for a year or two, secure in their position as rock's humble, working-class saviours. Well, as working class as you can be with 40-foot bronze statues, anyway. ❼

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2008 AC/DC BLAST BACK

ROCK'N'ROLL TRAIN

For eight long years they'd been silent. Then, seemingly out of the blue, **AC/DC** rediscovered their mojo with *Black Ice* and became bigger than ever.

Words **Henry Yates**

AC/DC were a band on ice. Eight years had passed since 2000's *Stiff Upper Lip* album, and five since their last performance at a SARS benefit concert in Toronto. Sony worked the back catalogue gamely enough, keeping the big hits and the schoolboy iconography in the public consciousness, but creatively speaking, there was an eerie silence from the world's loudest band.

Even worse, filling the void during the wilderness years were malignant whispers from that scurrilous tool of modern witchcraft, the internet. Cliff Williams had taken a career-threatening cut to the hand (true). Angus had a blues solo project on the go (false). Beano was packing it all in (almost true).

In reality, the Youngs had been knocking about material throughout the decade, with both determined to have "all the goods" before they hit the studio, perhaps wounded by the criticism that late-period AC/DC albums consisted of one great song surrounded by autopilot filler.

"The last gigs were done in 2003," Angus told *Guitar World*, "and after a while Malcolm and I got together in a studio in London. We'd pick a couple of song ideas and play away, work a bit and then take a break when we'd begin to get stale."

Angus: "If I write something, I just tend to mumble and get a rough tune going."

"I know that the boys wanted something special," Johnson told *Classic Rock* in 2008. "They really, really did. And when Angus and Malcolm make their mind up on something, they are stubborn. They will not stop until they get what they want. They're two stubborn guys when it comes to perfection."

Undoubtedly so. But, for the first time since the early days in Australia, the Youngs were also prepared to cede a little creative ground. It was telling that when AC/DC began recording at the Warehouse Studio in Vancouver, they were accompanied by Brendan O'Brien, a new producer who was openly pushing the band to ditch the latter-day blues vibe and reinstate the melodic rock-radio hooks.

"The AC/DC music that I remember most is *Highway To Hell* and *Back In Black*," O'Brien said, "which I view as pop songs done in a very heavy, ferocious way. Angus and Malcolm were writing songs that had a lot of hooks, and my only job was to make a record that made people say: 'I've missed AC/DC and I'm glad they're back.'"

> *"MY ONLY JOB WAS TO MAKE A RECORD THAT MADE PEOPLE SAY: 'I'VE MISSED AC/DC AND I'M GLAD THEY'RE BACK.'"* **BRENDAN O'BRIEN**

"I suppose that's good," conceded Angus. "Because I'm always a bit 'raw dog', you know? If I write something, I just tend to mumble and get a rough tune going. I'll concentrate more on the swing side of it than anything; the rhythm. But being a producer, Brendan knows how to bring out the melody. It gives you a bit of a kick up the butt. The guy's not gonna let just anything cruise, he'll make you work."

Certainly the producer could be pushy – Angus remembers being hectored to play a slide-guitar lead on *Stormy May Day* – but he also knew when to use a velvet glove.

"Before I started this album," Johnson told us, "I met Brendan for the first time and I said: 'Brendan, if I'm not up to scratch, if I'm not up to the job, please, please tell me. I'm a big boy. I won't cry, I'll just disappear. I'll say goodbye to the boys and they can get someone else in to do the job. And I really mean it.'"

At early Vancouver sessions, Johnson looked to be struggling, apparently needing the call and response of a crowd to summon his vocals. "I'm not a great singer," he admitted, "but I'm a passionate singer. I've gotta have a mic in me hand and I have to be able to move, which you can't do when there's a static mic. I think you've been able to tell on the last couple of albums, it's just been getting almost mechanical. And I wasn't proud of it."

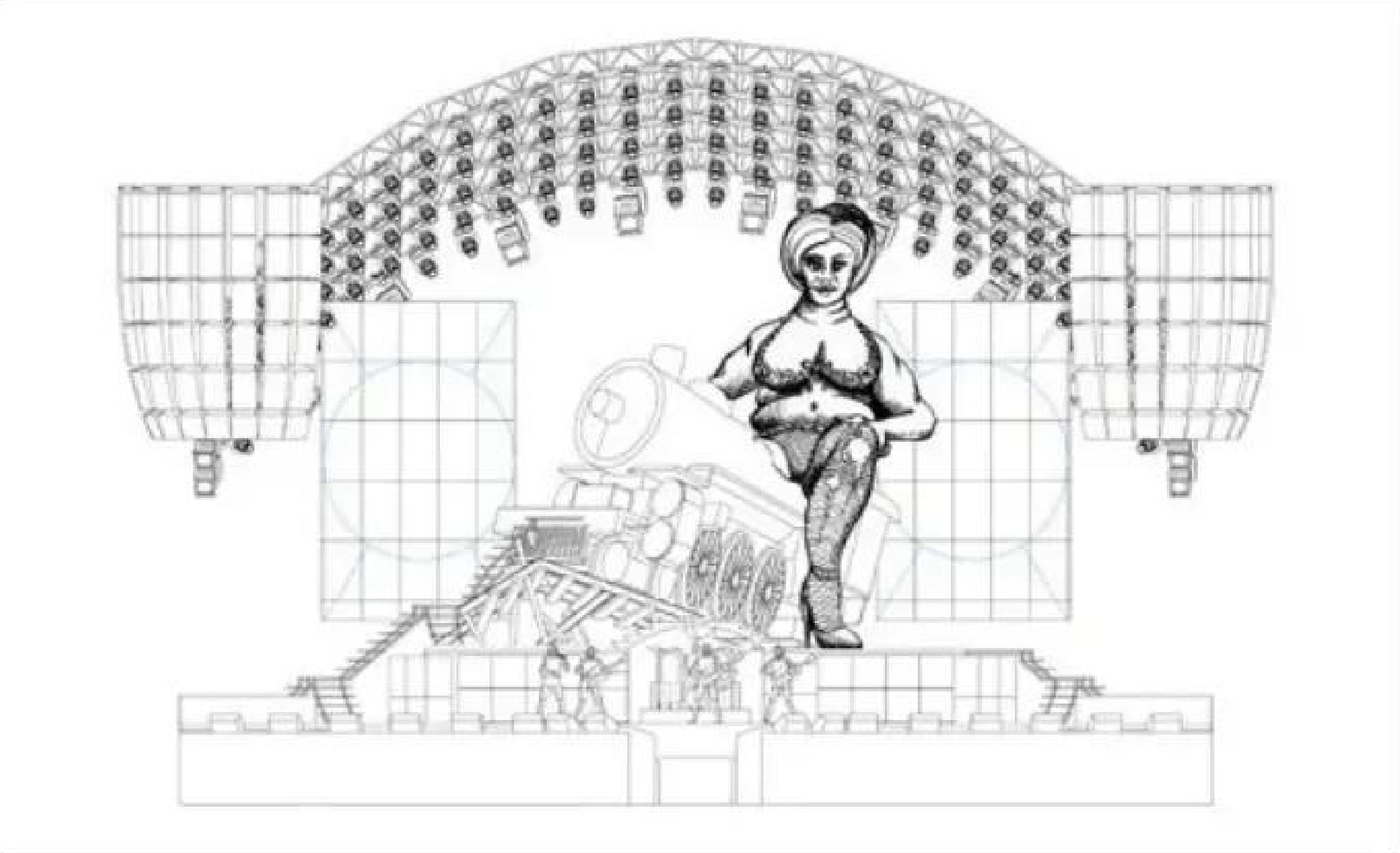
After Johnson told his producer that he "fucking hated" the studio experience, O'Brien nursed the singer's insecurities, ➻

ALL ABOARD!

AC/DC's *Black Ice* stage set, from drawing board to finished article.

For the *Black Ice* live experience, creative director Patrick Woodroffe and late British architect Mark Fisher of Stufish – who had previously brought to life such showstoppers as the Floyd's Wall and U2's PopMart arches – had new tricks up their sleeves. While the bell and cannons could be taken as read, "The idea has always been to give [AC/DC] a great opening to the show that then becomes the background to the rest of the performance," Woodroffe explained to *Live Design*.

"Patrick and I were looking to create maximum impact," added Fisher.



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AC/DC
AC/DC

Angus on the *Black Ice* tour: one of the highest-grossing tours of all time.

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“WHEN I FIRST HEARD THE PLAYBACKS, I HAD GOOSE-BUMPS. I THOUGHT I WAS LISTENING TO MESELF AS A YOUNG MAN.’” **BRIAN JOHNSON**

asking him to sing for just an hour each day, and finding a location for the vocal booth that played to his showman’s instincts.

“I came in,” Johnson recalls, “and Brendan said: ‘We’re gonna sing in here.’ And I said: ‘In there? That’s an office behind the reception desk, with glass windows! Everybody can see us when they’re coming in.’ And he went: ‘Well, at least there are people there.’ And that’s how I sang it. I just sang it right out there. Scared the receptionist every day, poor girl.”

Recorded and mixed in a head-spinning two months, these 15 songs represented AC/DC’s best material since 1981’s *For Those About To Rock*. Though hardly a reinvention of the wheel, from the guttersnipe chants of *Rock N Roll Train* to the glam-tinged *Anything Goes* and the meaty groove of *War Machine*, this was the sound of a restored line-up playing ferocious and fist-tight.

“Angus and Malcolm had written the songs in England, and I don’t believe the band even rehearsed before they came into the studio,” engineer Mike Fraser told *Sound On Sound*. “But they didn’t miss a beat and they were really tight. Right away there was this wall of sound coming at us. I’m a fan of the band, and I remember turning to my assistant Eric [Mosher] and saying: ‘Do we have the best job ever, or what?’”

If the new music rediscovered the blood and thunder of the old days, then moments like the epic *Rock N Roll Dream* proved there was still life in the Johnson pipes.

“When I first heard [the playbacks], I had bumps on me arms,” the singer said, “because I thought it was me twenty-five years ago. I went, ‘Holy shit!’ It was spooky. I thought I was listening to meself when I was a young man. And I can only put that down to Brendan O’Brien.”

There were some surprisingly astute lyrics, too, from *Money Made*’s beating-back of the corporate tentacles (Angus: “The focus seems to be: how do we get money out of this?”), to *War Machine*’s musings on the treatment of soldiers through history (although with four songs that had the word ‘rock’ in the title it was never too cerebral). Officially, only the Youngs were credited for the lyrics (and music), though Johnson would admit to giving the drafts a “kick up the ass”, and coming up with the memorably filthy couplet to *Big Jack* (*‘Big Jack, Big Jack, Santa ain’t the only one who’s got a full sack!’*). “I’m very proud of that,” he said. “It’s disgusting, but that’s what I’m all about, folks.”

Now they just needed the obligatory dangerous-sounding album title.

“I remember when I was a boy and I had me motorcycle,” explained Johnson. “And on the radio in the morning it said: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, today the weather is very cold outside. Please be careful of black ice on the roads.’ Black ice was dangerous and it couldn’t be seen. That was the whole thing about it – it was this ice that you couldn’t see that could fucking kill you.”

Black Ice it was. And so, in October 2008, AC/DC’s 14th international album duly went forth to top the charts in 29 countries and sell eight million copies. Not bad for a record that at the time was only issued physically, with Walmart given exclusive distribution rights across North America. “We’re the only band left in the world now that hasn’t signed to iTunes,” Johnson said at the time. “We want people to buy a record, a physical thing, not a number on a fucking download, which is what it’s turning into.”

“You get very close to the albums,” Angus told *The New York Times*, justifying the band’s reluctance to let fans cherry-pick tracks to download. “It’s like an artist who does a painting. If he thinks it’s a great piece of work, he protects it. It’s the same thing: this is our work.”

But even AC/DC would eventually relent, and they released their catalogue to iTunes some four years later, in November 2012.

But the commercial response left no doubt: the world needed *Black Ice*. More to the point, AC/DC needed it too. After several barren years, this album thawed the band out, planted their flag in the post-millennium, and minted several new songs that you genuinely hoped would be chalked on the set-list when you saw them live. “I think we realised that it was well worth waiting for,” said Johnson. “You couldn’t not bang your head to it.”

This heart-warming tale does has a chilling postscript. *Black Ice* was released more than five years ago now – even though the massively successful tour in support lasted right through until late June of 2010, including their hugely triumphant return to Donington to headline the Download festival (for which they even brought their own stage). In many ways the story ends as it began, with a hungry fan base left hanging, unsure whether they’ve heard the last from AC/DC. “But if this is the end,” Paul Elliott wrote in his review of *Black Ice* in *Classic Rock*, “they’ll be going out on a high.”

But don’t worry, we have a sneaky suspicion they’ll be back to surprise us.

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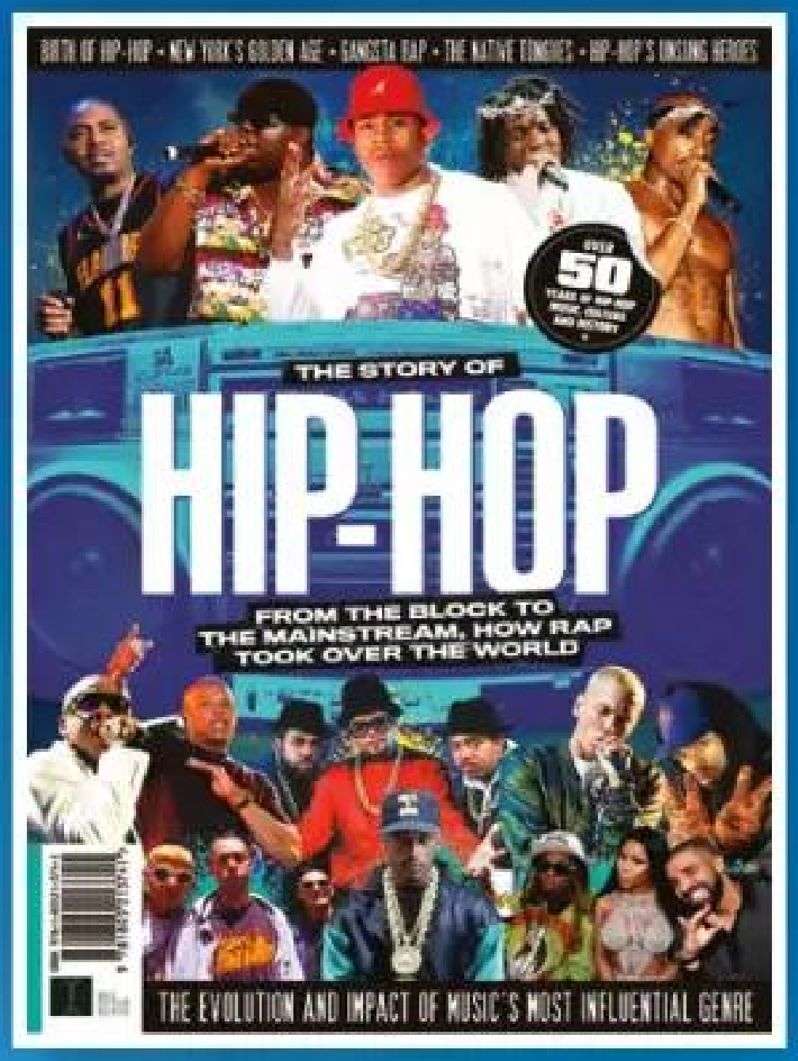

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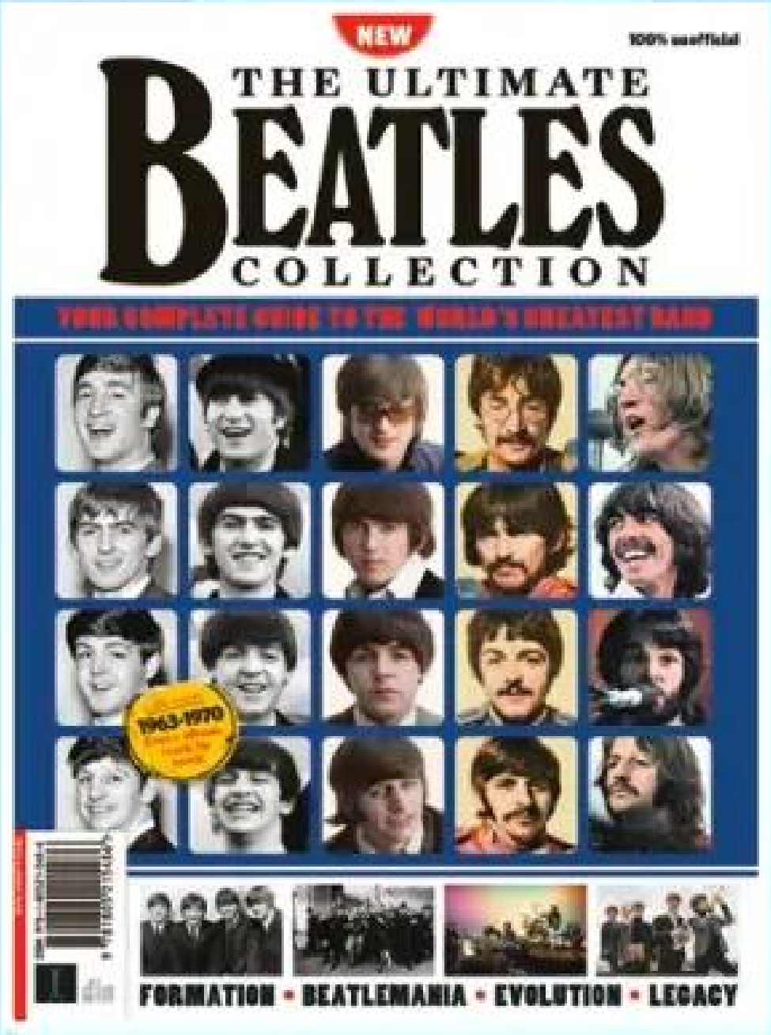
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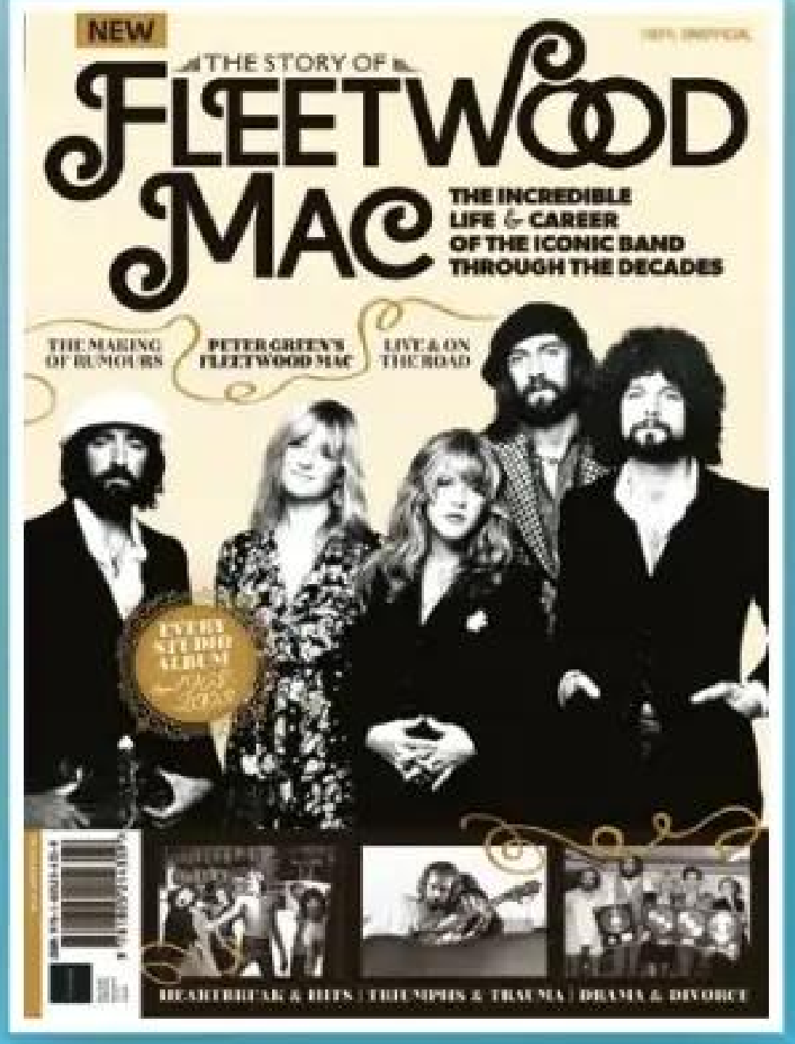
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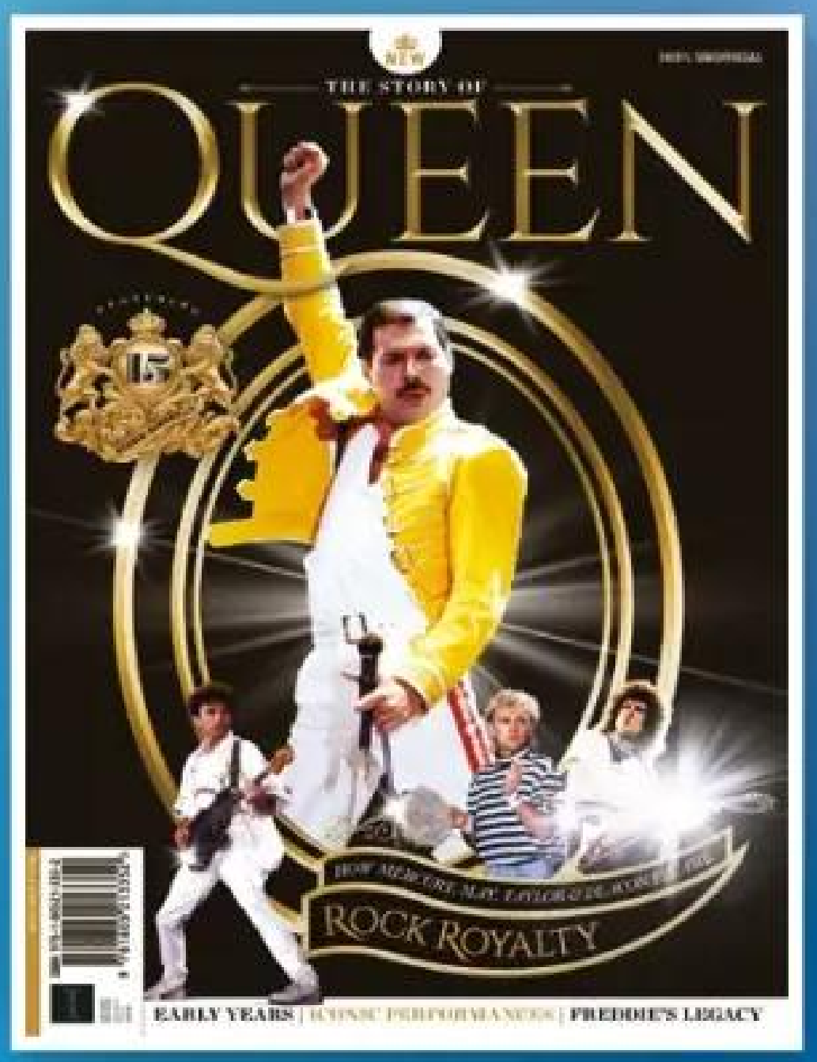

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TRAIN KEPT A-ROLLIN'

AC/DC
ROCK OR BUST

ON THE SKIDS? NO CHANCE.

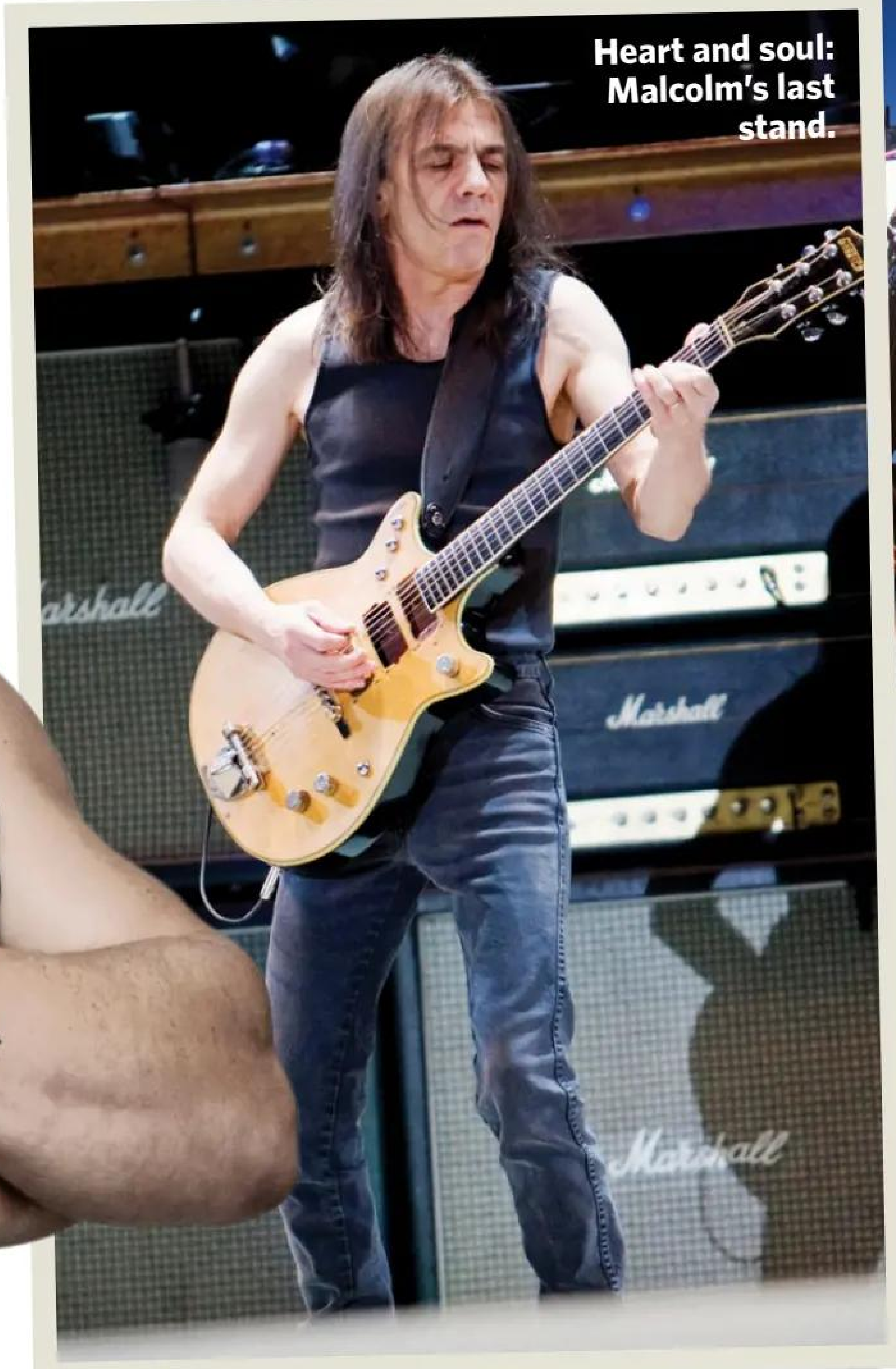
BLACK ICE 2008

ROCK OR BUST 2014

With failing health, their 'pilot' Malcolm was forced to take a back seat. But a new label and producer showed there was rock and roll thunder to be had yet...

Words: **Paul Rees** Photo: **Ashley Maile / Iconipix**

Angus and Bri, London 2008.



Heart and soul: Malcolm's last stand.

Busting out: on tour in Imola, Italy, July 2015.

A simple, but heartfelt and moving dedication on the inner sleeve of *Rock Or Bust* tells in many ways the story of AC/DC's two most recent albums. In full, it read: 'And most important of all, thanks to Mal who made it all possible.'

It was just as they were set to release *Rock Or Bust* that AC/DC confirmed a long-gestating rumour that Malcolm Young was out of the band. Suffering from the advanced stages of dementia, a statement revealed he was receiving full-time care at an undisclosed location in Australia.

In fact, signs of Malcolm's illness began to show when he and Angus Young reconvened, as was their practice, to swap the snatches of ideas each had separately compiled and start writing songs together for *Black Ice*. Little wisps of memory loss, which soon enough for him would cloud over into an impenetrable fog. That meeting went ahead in London in 2003, three years on from *Stiff Lipper Lip*, but it would be another five before *Black Ice* finally saw the light of day. It was put back by Cliff Williams suffering a serious hand injury and also the protracted negotiations that took the band from their previous label Elektra to Columbia Records.

It was March 2008 when AC/DC went back into the studio. For the ensuing two months, they holed up at the Warehouse Studio in Vancouver, Canada. No matter the protracted time apart, in most all respects their getting back together meant business as usual.

"The only surprise with AC/DC is how straightforward the recording is," notes Billy Bowers, vocal engineer on both *Black Ice* and *Rock Or Bust*. "There are no tricks, no effects, just two guitars, bass, drums and vocals. There is a lot of hard work but also civilised breaks for smoking, tea, jokes and stories. And Angus' s wife Ellen also made us all a lot of great food."

There was, though, one significant change and it was no accident. Brendan O'Brien came to AC/DC fresh from producing a brace of hit albums for another of Columbia's heritage artists, Bruce Springsteen. On *The Rising* from 2002 and *Magic* from 2007, O'Brien had injected new life and purpose into the E Street Band's decades-old sound. He went on to repeat that feat with *Black Ice*.

An accomplished guitarist in his own right, O'Brien focused on the nucleus of AC/DC's attack: Malcolm Young's metronomic chugging and Angus's fiery interjections. In particular, he paid attention to coaxing short, bursting hook lines out of Angus: the kind of flourishes he had shown off on *Highway To Hell* or *Back In Black*, but which had all but slipped from his repertoire. The album got an instant pay-off from O'Brien's approach. *Rock 'N' Roll Train*, a rousing call to arms, was the best opener to an AC/DC album since *Hells Bells*. The beat of the band was unmistakeable, but Angus's fluid counter-leads gave it renewed impetus. AC/DC hadn't sounded this fresh, this urgent in a quarter-century.

O'Brien pulled off a second masterstroke on Brian Johnson. Compelled to scrape at the upper limits of his range, Johnson had for years come over like a strangled budgie. Here, operating lower down his register, he grunted, growled and, yes, sung with the conviction of an old school soul man. Even the lesser songs on *Black Ice* were much better for that being the case.

"Brendan and I set Brian up in an outer office at the studio," recalls Bowers. "We put a bunch of gear in this small room and had Brian stood right next to us listening through speakers instead of headphones. He would do a handful of takes and that would be it. The guy's got a set of pipes that's for sure."

Time and again, *Black Ice* delighted and even surprised. *Big Jack*, jitterbugging, and *Anything Goes*, swinging, in turn brought to mind two of the venerable *Back In Black*'s staples, respectively *What Do You Do For Money Honey* and the joyous *You Shook Me All Night Long*. Angus' slide-guitar on *Stormy May Day* temporarily relocated AC/DC to the Mississippi Delta. Best of all, both *Decibel* and the title track stirred up a tasty blues-boogie gumbo that recalled nothing so much as 1970s vintage ZZ Top – Angus blowing hot, blue and righteous like Billy Gibbons. Each was underpinned by the eternally stomping teaming of Williams and Phil Rudd. But as always, AC/DC's pilot was Malcolm Young. Angus used to tell people his elder brother's guitar was strung with barbed wire. But for all that he was tough and unyielding, there was also a heart and soul to Malcolm's playing and this went to the very core of the band.

Not that *Black Ice* was all home runs. At 15 tracks and 55 minutes, it was too long and too reliant on the mid-tempo verse-chorus rockers that had become AC/DC's default setting. However, with eight much better than decent tracks it had a higher strike rate than any AC/DC album since *For Those About to Rock*… in 1981 and it proved to be their most successful record since then too. Released on October 20 2008, it rocketed to No. 1 in 29 countries and had shipped six million copies by the end of that year.

For the following world tour, the band had to truncate their set-lists as Malcolm's memory began to fail him. *Rock Or Bust* went ahead without him, but his presence hung over it like a shroud. It was, it could only ever be, half-formed, a ghost of a record. Left to shoulder the songwriting load, Angus went back to the store of riffs that Malcolm and he had stockpiled over the years. He managed to prize out a cracking opening one-two salvo with the title track and *Play Ball*. *Hard Times* was a diverting feel-good shuffle and *Rock The House* effectively repurposed Zeppelin's *Black Dog* until falling at a ham-fisted chorus. But the rest of its eleven tracks had the feel of a reheated meal.

"*ROCK OR BUST* WAS BITTERSWEET. MALCOLM WAS MISSED."

MIKE FRASER

Filling in for his departed uncle, Stevie Young did a serviceable job, but there was the inescapable sense that the crucial cog was now missing from AC/DC's engine. That where it had roared, it was now ticking over. The returning Brendan O'Brien over-compensated, beefing up and polishing their backing vocals to a Def Leppard-like sheen, which is to say that *Rock Or Bust* sounded like 'Mutt' Lange-era AC/DC, minus the essential element.

"Malcolm is and always will be the backbone of that band," insists Mike Fraser, guitar engineer on every AC/DC album since *The Razors Edge*. "He is probably one of the best guitarists I've ever worked with – not flash, but so solid and with a great feel and sense of tempo.

"Even when you saw them play live, everybody on that stage would be watching Mal. The little guy in the shadows was the one who directed the band. It was the same in the studio and Mal would fire everyone up if he thought it wasn't happening. Making *Rock Or Bust* was definitely bittersweet and his presence was for sure very much missed. Stevie's a good player, but he's not Malcolm."

Of course, Phil Rudd and seemingly now Brian Johnson have each since followed Malcolm out of the group. Certainly, neither of *Black Ice*, or even more so *Rock Or Bust* is faultless, but AC/DC's last two albums are good enough to be what now they should: this great, timeless band's valedictions.

2 X ALAMY

IT'S A LONG WAY TO THE TOP

Axed from AC/DC after being diagnosed with hearing problems, the band's frontman **Brian Johnson** has maintained the dignified silence you'd expect from the most down-to-earth rock god around. We look back at Beano's career, from life as a skint car roofer to stepping into the huge shoes of Bon Scott to what happens next.

Words: **Paul Brannigan**

GETTY

Mr Tambourine Man: with Geordie in 1973.

Geordie, 1974: Brian Johnson (2nd from left).

© GETTY IMAGES

Ian Jeffery was worried. AC/DC's normally unflappable tour manager had been tasked with co-ordinating auditions to find the band a new vocalist following the tragic death of Bon Scott, and he was all too aware of Malcolm and Angus Young's mounting frustration as one singer after another left London's Vanilla Studios without having made an impression. Heavy Metal Kids frontman Gary Holton, Back Street Crawler vocalist Terry Slesser and former Rick Wakeman sideman Gary Pickford-Hopkins had seemed like promising options, but in the spartan Pimlico rehearsal facility where The Clash had written their *London Calling* album the previous year, each of those singer's limitations had been harshly exposed.

Replacing the charismatic, cocksure Scott was never going to be an easy task. But as each name on AC/DC manager Peter Mensch's shortlist was systematically scored out, Jeffery began to question whether the Young brothers' heads and hearts were truly in this process – entirely understandable given that they'd laid their friend to rest in Freemantle just three weeks previously. To add insult to injury, it was starting to look like the next candidate hadn't even bothered to turn up.

A couple of AC/DC roadies were playing pool with a stranger in Vanilla's recreation room when Jeffery walked in. "How's it going?" one asked. "We're still waiting for this guy Brian to come," Jeffery replied.

"Brian?" the stranger asked, in a thick Geordie accent. "I'm fucking Brian!"

> "What would I do if I was sixteen again? Exactly the fucking same. I wouldn't change a thing."

In fairness to Jeffery, it had been some years since anyone had paid much attention to Brian Johnson. A car roofer and former paratrooper, the 32-year-old from Gateshead had enjoyed a fleeting moment in the spotlight in the early 70s when his glam-rock band Geordie enjoyed some minor chart success. But at the dawn of the 1980s, the singer was the only original member, dragging the band around the northern Working Men's Club circuit. By his own brutally frank assessment, Johnson had "passed my sell-by date".

Still, a try-out in the Big Smoke with a band now gracing the front covers of *Sounds* and *Melody Maker* would make a good story for the lads back home. "I thought: 'What harm can it do to sing a few songs with them?'" he said later.

Johnson had been on his way to work at Top Match car roofing on the morning of February 20, 1980 when he read in the *Daily Mail* that Bon Scott had died the previous day. He'd hung out with the likable, livewire Aussie briefly in 1973, when Scott's band Fang had supported Geordie at a pair of shows in Plymouth and Torquay, and had observed the singer's rise to stardom with some

JONNO'S GEMS

The Best Of Beano

All Because Of You ⚡ Geordie

More often than not evoking a bargain-basement Slade, Brian Johnson's first band peaked early with this gloriously pig-headed three-chord stomper from their debut album. Beano ably channels Noddy Holder on his aptly uproarious lead vocal, which is pitched at the mid- and best point of his range.

From *Hope You Like It*, 1973

Goin' Down ⚡ Geordie

The Mick Rock cover photo for Geordie's second album portrayed the four-piece band in gangster suits. If that suggested a more serious-minded makeover, this opening track soon proved otherwise. Against a throbbing bass line and over-employed cowbell, Johnson puffed out his chest and strutted, the whole reeking of Newcastle Brown Ale and Woodbines.

From *Don't Be Fooled By The Name*, 1974

House Of The Rising Sun ⚡ Geordie

This trad-folk staple was best-known as The Animals' 1965 hit single version. Geordie's subsequent take on it followed their fellow Newcastle band's approach step by step, initially treading cautiously but getting into their stride when Johnson lets rip at the one-minute mark. Here was proof positive that just like The Animals' great Eric Burdon he was a fine blues belter all along.

From *Don't Be Fooled By The Name*, 1974

Hells Bells ⚡ AC/DC

AC/DC's *Back In Black* album was released just months after Bon Scott's tragic death, and the doleful peal that introduced *Hells Bells* made it sound like a wake… at least up to moment the band rushed in behind it and Scott's replacement let out his first, defiant battle cry with them: *'I'm rolling thunder, I'm pouring rain, I'm coming on like a hurricane.'*

From *Back In Black*, 1980

Shoot To Thrill ⚡ AC/DC

Hot on the heels of *Hells Bells* came this, the first indication that the Johnson-fronted AC/DC would also have an abundance of grit and swagger. Johnson sings it with the joy of a man grinning like a Cheshire cat. It remained high up the set-list throughout his time with the band, and a fail-safe lift-off point for their live shows.

From *Back In Black*, 1980

© CHRIS WALTER/GETTY IMAGES

admiration, so he was "disgusted" to see his old pal's death merited only "two fucking inches" in the newspaper that winter morning.

Upstairs at Vanilla, he offered condolences to Scott's bandmates, and received a bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale in return from Malcolm Young. Asked to pick a couple of songs to perform with the band, Johnson chose Ike & Tina Turner's *Nutbush City Limits* and AC/DC's own *Whole Lotta Rosie*, both staples of Geordie's club-circuit set-list. Fifteen minutes later he was back out in the street, oblivious to the positive nods and smiles being exchanged by the Young brothers, bassist Cliff Williams and drummer Phil Rudd, but happy with his day's work.

"I swore I'd never get bitten by the rock'n'roll bug again," he later mused. "But these guys shook the shit out of me. I got goosebumps like I'd never had before."

Brian Johnson was born in Dunston, Gateshead, on the south bank of the River Tyne, on October 5, 1947. His father, Alan, who as a soldier had fought in Africa and Italy in World War II, took a job as a miner upon his return to Blighty. His mother, Esther, was born in Frascati, Italy. A confident, outgoing child, young Brian threw himself into amateur-dramatics theatre productions and sang in his school choir, and developed an interest in performing. Soon enough, in common with so many teenagers growing up in the late 1950s, he fell under the spell of American rock'n'roll. Although the family didn't own a record player, he vividly recalls seeing Little Richard for the first time on TV and remembers that "it was like someone had thrown a hand grenade into the room".

At the age of 15 Johnson began gigging locally with the curiously named, short-lived The Gobi Desert Canoe Club, becoming a singer by default as he didn't have the money to buy a guitar or drum set. When this most casual of collectives dissolved, the ambitious teenager cast his net further afield, and assembled South Shields-born guitarist Vic Malcolm and a Gateshead duo of bassist Tom Hill and drummer Brian Gibson – young musicians with an equal hunger and drive to break out from the North-East circuit – for a new group he called USA. Given that the fledgling group chose their name as indicative of their desire to transcend a local scene they considered insular and parochial, it was somewhat ironic that the first London record label to come sniffing around their high-energy, hooligan stomp insisted that the four-piece play up to regional pride and renamed themselves Geordie.

Sounds magazine may have been rather brutal in dubbing Geordie "rampant Slade imitators", but with Johnson's rasping, hoarse vocals on top of a pounding beat and Vic Malcolm's thick, chunky riffage it is difficult to take issue entirely with the band's debt to Noddy Holder's boot-boys. The comparison was certainly apt when applied to Geordie's punchy debut single *Don't Do That*, which broke into the UK Top 40 in December 1972 and garnered the young Johnson an opportunity to perform on the nation's premier music programme, *Top of The Pops*. A London show at the legendary Marquee club also put the group on the radar of the capital's music 'inkies, with *New Musical Express* reviewer Tony Tyler singling out Johnson as "the strongest character on stage", and praising his "looks and zaniness" as key factors in the band winning over a tough London audience. The strong review undoubtedly played a part in securing London support slots with the Velvet Underground and Slade, and a first overseas trip for the Geordie, supporting Chuck Berry.

The band started 1973 high on confidence, buoyed by strong reviews for their debut album *Hope You Like It*. Hailing it as "a very likable album indeed", *Phonograph Record* reviewer Ken Barnes noted: "Geordie is definitely a band to keep an eye on; you won't spot anything new but you'll like ▷

Back In Black ⚡ AC/DC

Arguably this was the track through which Johnson truly imprinted his own personality on AC/DC. If the title was a further mark of respect to his lamented predecessor, the song itself found Johnson spitting razor blades, easing into the pocket between Angus Young's combustible lead guitar and the vice-tight rhythm section of Malcolm Young, Cliff Williams and Phil Rudd and as if he'd been there all along.

From *Back In Black*, 1980

You Shook Me All Night Long ⚡ AC/DC

Back In Black's rambunctious signature single was also moulded to the new Johnson era. Where Scott was a devilish, lascivious presence, Johnson's brand of humour was cheekier, more saucy-seaside-postcard in tone and delivered here with a knowing nod and wink, as British as his own flat cap. An instant hit, it helped to propel *Back In Black* to worldwide sales of 50 million and counting.

From *Back In Black*, 1980

Rock And Roll Ain't Noise Pollution
Hells Bells

Rock And Roll Ain't Noise Pollution ⚡ AC/DC

Gleeful and irresistible in equal measure from the second a chuckling Beano urges '*all you middle men*' to '*throw away your fancy clothes*', right through its exultant chorus (upon which he turns 'rock' into a multi-syllable word), and up to its sardonic coda.

From *Back In Black*, 1980

For Those About To Rock (We Salute You) ⚡ AC/DC ⚡

AC/DC's definitive Johnson-era epic, and the undoubted high point of perhaps their most underrated album. It burns slowly, with Johnson growling benignly like a wizened old uncle, until the cannons fire and all hell breaks loose. To listen to Beano deliver the single-entendre line: '*Pick up your balls and load up your cannon*' is also to imagine Sid James as Horatio Hornblower.

From *For Those About To Rock We Salute You*, 1981

FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK

Let's Get It Up ⚡ AC/DC

The first of what would soon become a standard for Johnson's AC/DC: a rollicking, good-time barroom boogie rendered in shades of *Carry On*-style humour. When once pressed by the late Tommy Vance to explain the precise meaning of the song's lyrics, Johnson cackled: "Well, see, it's about a flag…"

From *For Those About To Rock We Salute You*, 1981

AC/DC, November 12, 1980: (l-r) Brian Johnson, Malcolm Young, Angus Young, Phil Rudd and Cliff Williams backstage at Hammersmith Odeon, London on the Back In Black Tour.

what you see.” When the album’s second single, *All Because Of You*, crashed into the Top 10 at the tail end of March, they made a second appearance on *Top Of The Pops*, and came to the attention of The Who’s Roger Daltrey who promised them studio time to refine their raw, combustible chops.

The following month Geordie played the two gigs with Fang, an Australian group formed from the ashes of the Bon Scott-fronted Fraternity. The Torquay gig would prove to be a memorable one for both singers.

“I had a terrible case of appendicitis, and I went down on my side, kicking and going: ‘Ooh!’” Johnson recalled. “But I kept on singing. Apparently Bon told the boys when he joined AC/DC: ‘I saw this guy Brian Johnson sing, and he was great. He was on the floor, kicking and screaming – what an act!’ Of course, it wasn’t an act. I was really ill!”

The following month, Geordie returned to their native North-East and played a sold-out headline show at Newcastle’s famous Mayfair club, and received another glowing *NME* review: “It’s like they just walked off a factory floor,” marvelled reviewer James Johnson (presumably no relation). “Geordie are loud and crass and very straightforward. What they have going for them is an incredible rough energy.” This, however, would prove to be the band’s high-water mark.

It’s difficult to pin down exactly why the anticipated breakthrough didn’t happen for Geordie. Though the band’s third single, *Can You Do It*, pierced the Top 20 in June, indications of audience affections cooling were telegraphed when its follow-up, the raunchy but warm-hearted *Electric Lady* – penned by Malcolm in honour of his fiancee Cecilie D’Ambrosie – scraped into the Top 40 at No.32 in August ’73. But with the quartet due back in the studio in October to record a second album, Brian Johnson was confident that his group had momentum.

An energy-sapping, and ill-fated, six-week tour of Australia in early 1974 was a mis-step, however, and by the time their second album, *Don’t Be Fooled By The Name*, was released in April, it was quickly evident that their audience had moved elsewhere.

Main songwriter Viv Malcolm bailed early in 1975, and by the summer of ’75, Johnson too walked, disillusioned and frustrated with record company expectations and fan demands alike. When he took up an offer of work from his brother’s car-roofing company, Johnson’s idea of following in the footsteps of local heroes The Animals and getting *‘out of this place’* seemed like a cruel and unamusing joke.

“I was completely broke,” he acknowledged. “I had nothing. And I had two kids and a mortgage to pay. I was driving a VW Beetle that was fourteen years old. I was fucking skint.”

And then came a call informing Johnson that he’d been recommended as a potential singer for a rock’n’roll band who were currently holding auditions in London…

The official announcement that Brian Johnson was to be the new singer of AC/DC was made on April 1, 1980. Johnson had received the news in a phone call from Malcolm Young three days earlier at his parents’ home in Gateshead, where he was living following the break-up of his marriage to his first wife, Carol. As a divorced father-of-two still paying the mortgage on his marital home, Young’s offer of a £5,000 ‘signing on’ fee, a retainer of £170 a week and the offer of a new car must have been music to Johnson’s ears.

That same morning, he had read in the *New Musical Express* that Allan Fryer from Adelaide hard rockers Fat Lip had been chosen to fill Scott’s shoes – fake news dismissed as “bullshit” by the straight-talking Young. But it is perhaps forgivable that after speaking to AC/DC’s rhythm guitarist, Johnson subsequently necked half of the bottle of whisky he’d been planning to give to his father that afternoon for his birthday.

Within the week, Johnson had moved down to London to join the band at E-Zee Hire studios to begin writing the follow-up to their million-selling 1979 album *Highway To Hell* album.

“I still don’t know quite where I am,” Johnson cheerfully admitted to *Sounds* journalist Dave Lewis in his first interview after joining AC/DC. “All I know is there’s a stack of work to do, and the rest of the band have still got to find out about me yet. Being with the lads here is great, but I’m still scared shitless!

“I suppose I’m a lucky lad in a way,” he continued, “cos I’ve never even seen AC/DC play live, or even on the TV. I’ve always been too busy gigging myself. I’ve heard all about ’em and their fantastic show, of course. And I’ve got all the albums in the house, cos it’s my kind of music and I love ’em. I’m out-and-out basic, man, and to me they are one of the best rock’n’roll bands in the world – doing things just to the basics.

“The first time I met this lot I felt as if I could go out and have a pint with ’em and I wouldn’t ▷

GEORGE CHIN/ICONICPIX; GEORGE BODNAR ARCHIVE/ICONICPIX

FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK

Breaking The Rules ϟ AC/DC ϟ

AC/DC were hardly the most pliable of bands, but *For Those About To Rock* nevertheless found AC/DC willing on occasion to stretch out within the confines of their own well-honed formula. As on this languorous blues, which gave Johnson an opportunity to sing, not screech, and was all the better for it.

From *For Those About To Rock We Salute You*, 1981

FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK

Spellbound ϟ AC/DC

The other of *For Those About To Rock*’s relative left turns was this brooding, smouldering near-ballad, with Johnson creeping like a panther around Angus’s plangent riff as the man whose world keeps tumbling down. It remains one of the true lost treasures of AC/DC’s catalogue.

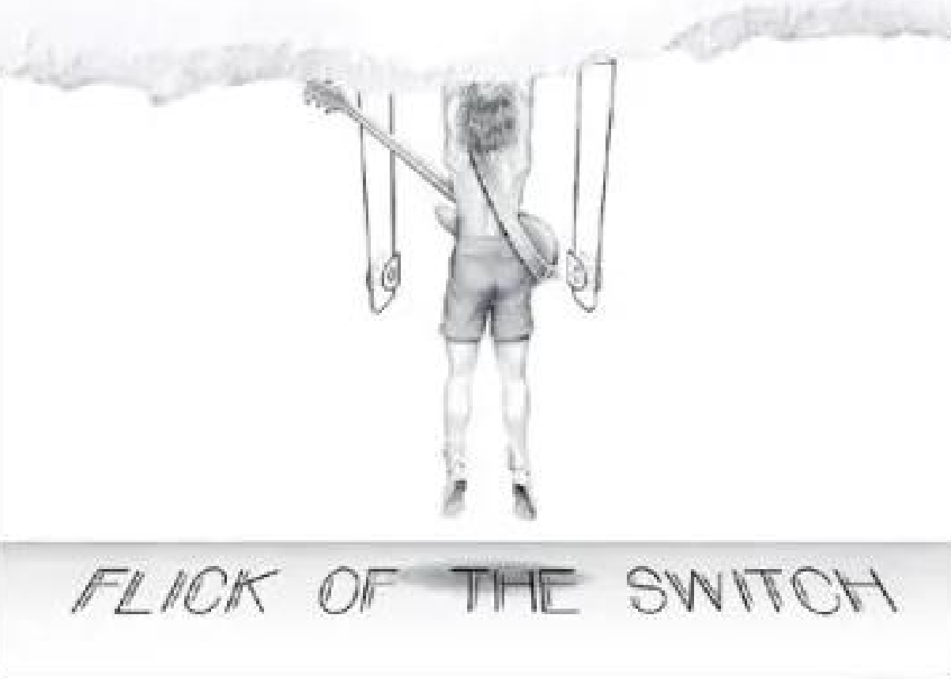
From *For Those About To Rock We Salute You*, 1981

FLICK OF THE SWITCH

Nervous Shakedown ϟ AC/DC ϟ

Without ‘Mutt’ Lange’s slick production, *Flick Of The Switch* was for the most part a dour, dry-sounding record, workmanlike rather than inspired. *Nervous Shakedown* was one of two exception to that. Built on a juddering, stop-start riff, over which Johnson screams hellfire and damnation, it’s stirring stuff still.

From *Flick Of The Switch*, 1983



Badlands ϟ AC/DC

The other *Flick Of The Switch* standout. Angus here uncorks a vicious bottleneck riff and then drills it through the track. Johnson goes after it with the relish of a wild dog given a steak to sink its teeth into after being on a near-starvation diet.

From *Flick Of The Switch*, 1983

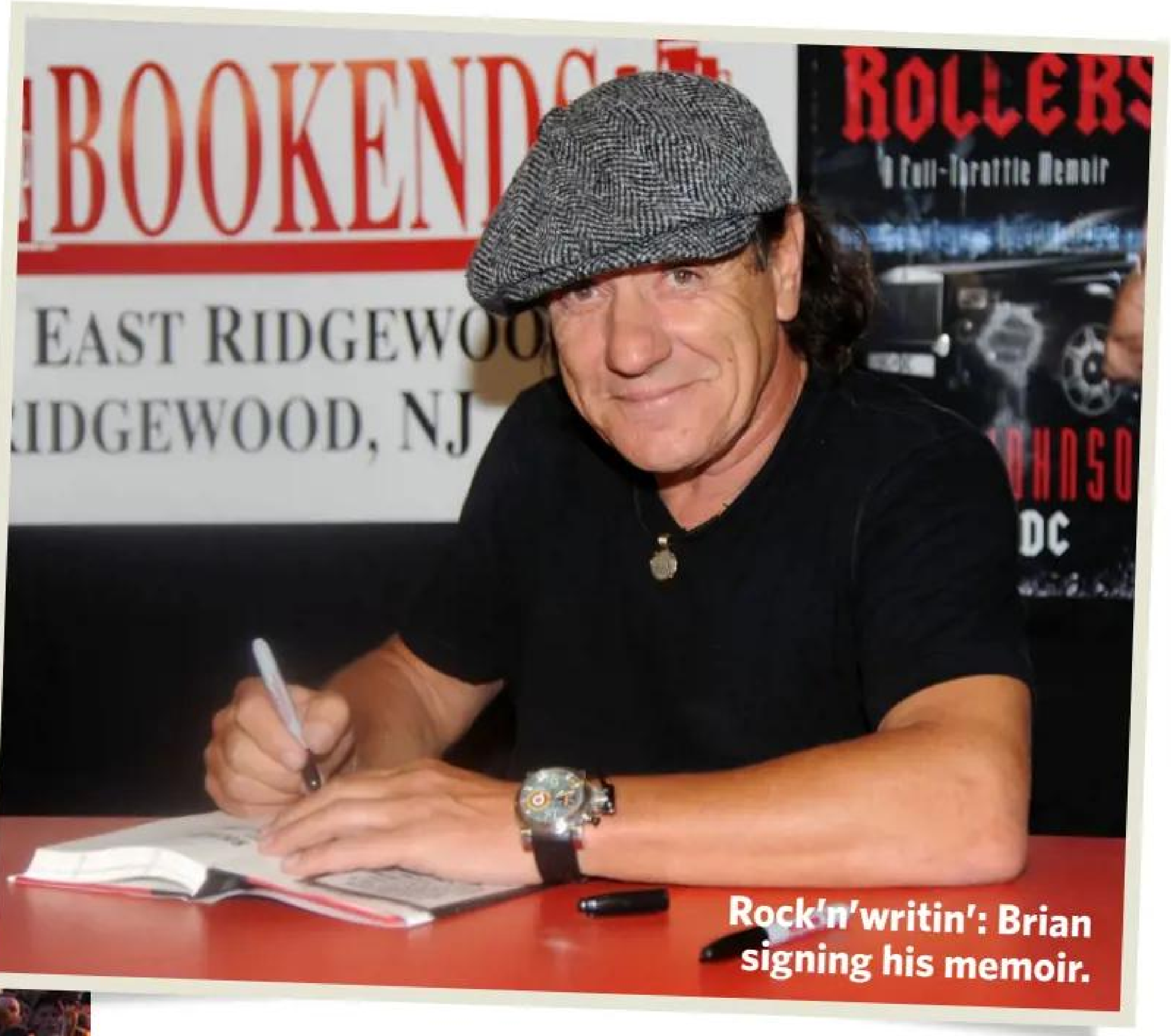
Danger ϟ AC/DC

A strong contender for AC/DC’s worst album, the self-produced *Fly On The Wall* mostly made the ill-starred Johnson sound like a budgie breathing helium. Allowed on this bluesy shuffle to drop down his register and granted space to move, he proved yet again what a fine, expressive singer he can be.

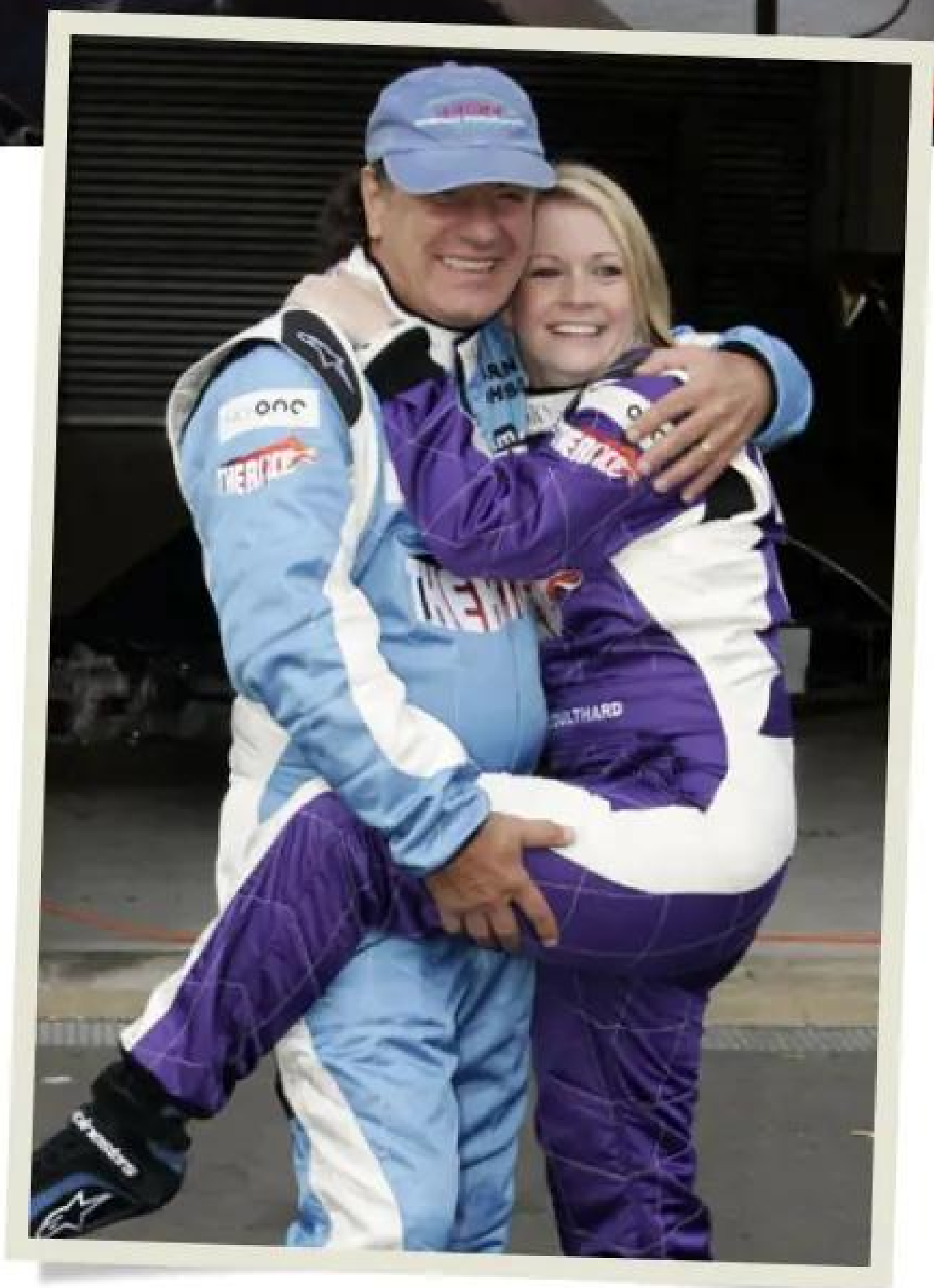
From *Fly On The Wall*, 1985

> “I swore I’d never get bitten by the rock’n’roll bug again, but AC/DC shook the shit out of me. I got goosebumps like I’d never had before.”

Angus and Brian, doing what they do best.



Rock'n'writin': Brian signing his memoir.



Below: Brian's first taste of TV, with Melissa Joan Hart at Silverstone for *The Race*, 2006.

have to prove anything," Johnson continued. "I think it's going to be great. It's going to be smashing once we've done one tour and people start saying: 'Okay, right, that's him, that's the new singer. He's the one now so we've got to accept him.'

"Yeah, I'm going to be nervous at first, no doubt, but I'll give it my best shot. I mean, once I get up there I don't give a fuck. I just get on and do my best. I've always been lucky enough to have a good rapport with audiences, so I just hope they give us a chance."

Even by AC/DC's notoriously unsentimental standards, the statement that signalled the end of Brian Johnson's 36-year tenure fronting the band was brutally blunt: "AC/DC are forced to reschedule the 10 upcoming dates on the U.S. leg of their "Rock or Bust" World Tour," read the statement on the band's website on March 7, 2016. "AC/DC's lead singer, Brian Johnson, has been advised by doctors to stop touring immediately or risk total hearing loss. Tomorrow's show in Atlanta through Madison Square Garden in New York, NY in early April will be made up later in the year, likely with a guest vocalist."

The lack of a quote from Johnson, or any acknowledgement whatsoever of the singer's contribution to the band across four decades, irked and offended many long-term fans, especially as it came after the outpouring of love offered to AC/DC in the aftermath of Malcolm Young's retirement from the band in 2014 due to his dementia. It was left to Johnson himself to explain the situation and absolve his former bandmates of blame in a statement released the following month: "I had for a time become aware that my partial hearing loss was beginning to interfere with my performance on stage," Johnson admitted. "I was having difficulty hearing the guitars on stage, and because I was not able to hear the other musicians clearly I feared the quality of my performance could be compromised. In all honesty, this was something I could not in good conscience allow.

"Our fans deserve my performance to be at the highest level, and if for any reason I can't deliver that level of performance I will not disappoint our fans or embarrass the other members of AC/DC. I am not a quitter and I like to finish what I start. Nevertheless, the doctors made it clear to me and my bandmates that I had no choice but to stop performing on stage for the remaining shows and possibly beyond.

"Being part of AC/DC, making records and performing for the millions of devoted fans this past thirty-six years has been my life's work," Johnson said. "I cannot imagine going forward without being part of that, but for now I have no choice. The one thing for certain is that I will always be with AC/DC at every show in spirit, if not in person."

Befitting the dignified, respectful manner in which Johnson has conducted his entire professional career, little has been heard from the 69-year-old singer since, save for the occasional pronouncement that he would love to return to fronting AC/DC, even as the band completed their *Rock Or Bust* world tour with Axl Rose subbing for Johnson with commendable humility and no little charm. As yet, however, there has been no indication that the door remains open for Johnson.

This month, though, he returns to the spotlight wearing a different cap – metaphorically, if quite possibly not literally – as a documentary host, fronting a new Sky TV series titled *Brian Johnson's Life On The Road*. Having cut his teeth as a presenter in 2014 on Quest TV's *Cars That Rock With Brian Johnson*, in the new series Johnson will conduct interviews about music, touring and the rock'n'roll lifestyle, with guests including The Who's Roger Daltrey, Pink Floyd's Nick Mason, Metallica drummer Lars Ulrich and fellow Geordie Sting, on whose 2013 album *The Last Ship* Johnson guested.

Although the programmes are structured in a conventional fashion, with archive footage and talking-heads comment spliced with Johnson's affectionate, conversational one-on-one interviews, the format does lend itself to the intensely private Johnson sharing personal ▷

GETTY x4

WHO MADE WHO
GUNS FOR HIRE (LIVE VERSION)

Who Made Who ⚡AC/DC⚡

This track might have soundtracked a lousy Stephen King film adaptation, but it nonetheless represented a return to vintage form for AC/DC. It's so effortless sounding that one can picture Johnson singing his vocals from a bar stool, a beer in one hand, a fag in the other, and an expression of delight on his face.

From *Who Made Who*, 1986

BLOW UP YOUR VIDEO

That's The Way I Wanna Rock N Roll ⚡AC/DC⚡

Increasingly, AC/DC's mid-80s and 90s albums offered slim pickings, but somewhere on them there would most likely be a knockout single. A case in point is this jitterbug burst from the otherwise mundane *Blow Up Your Video*. Roused to action, Johnson could still sing like a man who sounded in love with his very being.

From *Blow Up Your Video*, 1988

Thunderstruck ⚡AC/DC

The mark of *Thunderstruck*'s gonzo genius is how it tantalises the listener before bringing Johnson into the fray. First comes Angus's spiralling guitar figure, next a gang-vocal chant and a hulking drum battery, and only then does that unmistakeable voice enter the picture. Tellingly, at that precise point this could be the work of no other band.

From *The Razors Edge*, 1990

ANGUS YOUNG
B8886

Moneytalks ⚡AC/DC

Thunderstruck promised much, only for *The Razors Edge* album to lead on to dreck like *Mistress For Christmas* and *Got You By The Balls*, one as instantly forgettable as the other. However, it also had this joyous romp, 12 bars and a gleeful vocal that shone out among the surrounding greys.

From *The Razors Edge*, 1990

Boogie Man ⚡AC/DC

As low-down and dirty as the Rick Rubin-produced *Ballbreaker* got, this grinding blues track was the perfect platform on which Johnson could grandstand. Pitching his vocals deep and guttural, he attacks each line with relish and a sense of soul for which he has rarely been credited. Which made it all the more regrettable that Rubin wasn't elsewhere able to coax the band as a whole to such heights.

From *Ballbreaker*, 1995

“This band’s the f**king best! Now and again I’ve forgotten I’m singing and I just stop and watch that band, because I think they’re just f**king great. A great band and a great bunch of lads.”

Road tales: Brian with Roger Daltrey and (inset) Lars Ulrich.

anecdotes too, whether reminiscing with Sting about both of them seeing Jimi Hendrix at Newcastle's Club A GoGo in 1967, or telling Lars Ulrich that he used to check into hotels using the single-entendre pseudonyms Phil McCavity or Richard Hertz, aka Mr Dick Hurts. It's actually quite sweet hearing Daltrey and Johnson reminisce excitedly about smuggling T-bone steaks wrapped in tin foil back to the UK from their first US tours purely so that their respective working-class families could marvel at the existence of such exotic fare.

As game as the interviewees invariably are, it's Johnson's blend of matey bonhomie, unbridled enthusiasm and salt-of-the-earth working-man attitude that makes the series shine, and it's a rare and welcome opportunity to see the singer operating without the omertà code that has always kept outsiders at a distance from AC/DC. Not that you'll hear Johnson spilling his guts about his time in the band, or airing any grievances he may harbour about his sudden exit – indeed the singer has been turning down promotional interviews for the series for fear of any quotes about his time in AC/DC being taken out of context – but his avuncular, easy manner lays him open in away one has rarely seen since *Black In Black* turned him and his new bandmates into the biggest rock band in the world.

And *Back In Black* unquestionably transformed Brian Johnson's life. By his own admission, he was "scared shitless" when he was flown to Compass Point in the Bahamas for six weeks in the studio with golden-eared producer Robert 'Mutt' Lange, but his new colleagues never made him "feel like I was standing in a dead man's shoes", and Lange coaxed the performance of a lifetime from the singer.

> **"The one thing for certain is that I will always be with AC/DC at every show in spirit, if not in person."**

The biggest-selling hard rock album in history wasn't an immediate success. After assuring the new boy that the record was "fantastic" and was "gonna do the business", Atlantic Records understandably panicked when the much-anticipated follow-up to the platinum-selling *Highway To Hell* entered the *Billboard* 200 at No.89 in August 1980. But by the following February it was in the US Top 10, where it would remain for almost six months. Johnson was almost comically unaffected by his arrival in the big time – when *Sounds* magazine covered AC/DC's US arena tour, they found him cooking bacon and eggs in LA's chic, upscale Sunset Marquis hotel, but seemingly wholly at ease with his new station in life.

"You know the first thing Angus and Malcolm said to me when I joined this band?" he asked journalist Sylvie Simmons. "They said: 'Do you mind if your feelings ever get hurt?' And I said: 'Why?' And they said: 'Because if you're going to join this band you're going to be expected to take fucking stick. Because we've been slagged off by every fucking reporter since we left Australia.' I said: 'Well, I'm going to have to take stick anyway, taking this lad's place.

"But we're good in our field," he continued. "We out and out just don't give a fuck. We play what we play and that's it. And the good thing is, no one else can do it as good as this band. This band's the fucking best! Now and again I've forgotten I'm singing, and I just stop and watch that band, because I think they're just fucking great. A great band and a great bunch of lads."

Thirty-six years on, you won't hear Brian Johnson giving a differing opinion of the band that now seem to have left him behind. But that should come as little surprise to fans of a man who has always been the most loyal, selfless and unaffected rock'n'roller, and is now a petrolhead multimillionaire who won't even let race announcers mention his former day job for fear that it might make fellow drivers think him "an asshole". If he never stands on a stage again, Brian Johnson's place in rock history is assured. And you sense that the canny Geordie who has never forgotten his roots has made his peace with that.

"A lot of people up at my dad's drinking club still look on me with a bit of pity," Johnson once told an interviewer at the height of AC/DC's fame. "They say: 'Ee, poor fucker. Still hasn't got a decent job.' But I know I'm a lucky git.

"What would I do if I was sixteen again? Exactly the fucking same. I wouldn't change a thing."

Since this article was published, Johnson returned to AC/DC in 2020.

BRIAN & ROGER DALTREY: ALISON PAINTER/SKY

Safe In New York City
AC/DC

Another diamond in the rough, spat out from yet another so-so AC/DC album, this one rolled out over a sinister, chugging Angus riff, with Johnson screaming from the rooftops. The wind-up chorus, which amounts to the title being repeated over and again, was oddly thrilling.
From *Stiff Upper Lip*, 2000

Rock N Roll Train
⚡ AC/DC ⚡

Not since *Highway To Hell* had an AC/DC album opened with such a stampeding flourish. Crucially, Johnson was also at long last allowed to not have to grasp for his highest register. Back in his comfort zone, he delivered a reminder that he's one of hard rock's most distinctive and greatest voices.
From *Black Ice*, 2008

Anything Goes ⚡ AC/DC

A classic, mid-paced AC/DC chugger brandishing two of the band's greatest weapons: that metronomic but deftly swinging rhythm section, and their too often taken for granted frontman's ability to take the simplest melody line by the scruff of the neck and lift it off its feet. Sadly, it now stands as a last hurrah for the stricken Malcolm Young.
From *Black Ice*, 2008

Rock Or Bust ⚡ AC/DC

For what appears to be Johnson's final recorded act as AC/DC's singer, it's a pity that the *Rock Or Bust* album had the feel of being salvaged rather than conjured. The title track, though, burst out of the gate with intent, demonstrating just how perfectly matched Johnson was to the band's elemental bump and grind.
From *Rock Or Bust*, 2014

Hard Times ⚡ AC/DC

Johnson recorded his vocal tracks for *Rock Or Bust* in just one or two takes. This almost buried gem – a short, sharp, pumping blues – is the best example of that bottled magic. Here was a man at the top of his game, as instinctive as he seems now irreplaceable.
From *Rock Or Bust*, 2014

WORDS: PAUL REES

For the stories behind the best albums and the bands that produced them…

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LET THERE BE ROCK. AGAIN

They'd lost Malcolm. Brian was out. Phil was in trouble with the law. Cliff had retired. Despite a successful tour with Axl Rose, it looked like **AC/DC**'s high voltage had been unplugged for good. Not so. Angus Young and Brian Johnson talk exclusively to *Classic Rock* about the resurrection of the greatest hard rock'n'roll band ever.

Words: **Paul Elliott** Photos: **Josh Cheuse**

In the end it all came down to one simple thing: Angus Young could not imagine a life without the band in which he has played lead guitar since 1973. He was just 18 when he formed AC/DC with his brother Malcolm on rhythm guitar. Over 50 years later, this band is still what he lives for. As he says now: "It's part of what you are."

The reunion album, *Power Up*, is dedicated to the memory of Malcolm Young, Angus's elder brother and former AC/DC rhythm guitarist, who died in 2017. It's also testimony to the staying power of Angus, and his determination to carry on as his brother had wished, making good on a promise he made when Malcolm was near the end of his life.

There's a reassuringly familiar look to the AC/DC line-up in 2020. Alongside Angus are three long-serving veterans: singer Brian Johnson, who replaced the late Bon Scott in 1980, bassist Cliff Williams, ever-present since 1977, and drummer Phil Rudd, in the band on and off, but mostly on, since 1974. And on rhythm guitar, keeping it in the family, is Stevie Young, Angus's nephew, only two years his junior. Stevie first played with AC/DC on a 1988 tour when Malcolm was in rehab, and was the only guy considered for the job in 2014 after Malcolm's struggle with dementia forced him to withdraw from the band.

Equally reassuring is the sound of *Power Up* (or *PWR/UP* as its sleeve will tell you). As signposted by the lead single *Shot In The Dark*, this is AC/DC as they have always been: the riffs lean and mean, the boogie heavy, choruses shouted out, and Johnson still sounding, as Angus once said, like a guy who's had a truck dropped on his foot. With a classic, no-frills production by Brendan O'Brien, who worked on the preceding *Black Ice* and *Rock Or Bust*, *Power Up* is straight-shooting hard rock'n'roll from the masters of the art.

> "This one's for Mal. I always think he's part of it, you know? He's still with us in spirit. I still feel the presence."
> **– Angus Young**

While the album sounds like business as usual, the story of the band in recent years has been anything but. Ever since Malcolm stepped down in the early stages of his illness, leaving Angus to lead the band, it's been a bumpy ride. Twice, Angus has had to shuffle his pack. First when Phil Rudd was sidelined ahead of the *Rock Or Bust* tour in 2014, following his arrest on charges of attempting to procure a murder, threatening to kill, and possession of controlled drugs. In Rudd's absence, Angus turned to Chris Slade, who first played with AC/DC in 1990. Then, halfway through that tour, with Brian Johnson unable to continue, having sustained ear damage that threatened to render him permanently deaf, Angus had to bring in a substitute, Guns N' Roses singer Axl Rose, to finish the job. Then when that troubled tour reached its end in September 2016, Cliff Williams had announced his retirement, commenting that it wasn't the same, that the band was "a changed animal", without Brian and Phil and Malcolm. At that point it seemed that the future of AC/DC was out of Angus's hands. He still had Stevie to call on, and Chris Slade if required, but Williams's decision appeared final, Rudd was in a bad place, and Johnson feared he might never sing again.

With the band in disarray, Angus was also experiencing the worst of times in his personal life. In the last months of 2017 he lost Malcolm, just a few weeks after the death of their elder brother George, who, as a former star of Australian band The Easybeats and as co-producer of AC/DC's early albums, had been a major influence on their lives.

The band had achieved more than Angus could ever have dreamed, selling more than 200 million albums and filling stadiums worldwide. *Back In Black*, AC/DC's 1980 comeback, with Johnson in place of Scott, had become the second-biggest-selling album of all time, behind Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. There were no more mountains to climb. It would have been understandable if Angus, now in his sixties, had decided to call it quits, not least because Malcolm was no longer around.

But that's not how Angus saw it. Back in 1980, when AC/DC were making *Back In Black*, he said he felt that Bon's spirit was with them. During the making of *Power Up* there was a similar sense for Angus – of his brother still watching over the band. Every song on this album is based on ideas that the two brothers had worked on right up to the time when Malcolm could no longer do so. Long ago, Angus described *Back In Black* as "our tribute to Bon". Now he says of the new AC/DC album: "This one's for Mal. I always think he's part of it, you know? He's still with us in spirit. I still feel the presence."

On the day in late September when Angus and Brian talk to *Classic Rock* via conference call, they are on opposite sides of the world, Angus in Australia, Brian in the UK. It's funny how they greet each other, almost as if they're surprised to be having this conversation. "Hello Ang?" "Is that Brian?" "Yeah, it's me, bonny boy!" The voices are unmistakable, Angus's nasal Aussie drawl and gurgling laugh, Brian's unvarnished Geordie accent and rasping tone. There's an easy repartee between them as they bounce off each other, cracking jokes at every opportunity. The mood shifts a little when they address the serious stuff, the difficult questions. There are moments when both struggle to find the right words – Angus when expressing the emotions he went through in the dark days of 2017, Brian when reflecting on his time out of the band. There's also the subject of Brian's ongoing medical treatment for his voice and hearing, something, he explains, he is not at liberty to discuss in detail.

For an hour they talk through the turbulent events of the past few years and recall some from 40 years ago. Throughout the conversation, one name keeps coming up, that of Malcolm Young, the tough little character whose drive and no-bullshit ethos pushed AC/DC to the very top. They talk about what it means to have this line-up of the band – the perfect line-up in the circumstances – back together again. They begin by talking about the new album, its title, as Angus and Brian explain it, a statement of intent, like those of previous landmark AC/DC albums: *High Voltage, Let There Be Rock, If You Want Blood You've Got It, For Those About To Rock We Salute You* and, most evocative of all, *Back In Black*.

"AC/DC has always been about the power thing," Angus says. "I've always felt when I was plugging in my guitar that I was plugging in to a big electrical grid. So when 'Power Up' came into my head, I thought, yeah, that's it."

"You don't have to think about it," Brian adds. "It's just right."

So, it's here, at last – a new AC/DC album. And it's fair to say that AC/DC fans will be pleasantly unsurprised by what they hear when they listen to it.

Angus: Well, with any album we've ever made, any track we've ever done, the one thing we always aim for is to make it so that as soon as you hear it you know it's AC/DC.

Brian: It's just rock'n'roll, you know? It's a powerful thing. Everybody loves rock'n'roll. And by crikey the world needs it right now, my son! ▷

Powered up for the latest chapter of the AC/DC story: (l to r) Cliff Williams, Phil Rudd, Angus Young, Brian Johnson, Stevie Young.

Stevie Young, Cliff Williams and Angus Young on the video shoot for new single *Shot In The Dark*, and (inset) 1980-vintage AC/DC on the *Back In Black* tour.

Had you finished recording the album before the pandemic began?
Angus: More or less, yeah. But then we had to think about when to put it out. You're ready to go, and then you're plunged in the middle of the whole covid thing. Is that what they call it, covid?
Brian: I guess it is. I call it shite. We were all pumped-up, and then to get stopped in your tracks… Boy, that's frustrating.

But now, with the album coming out, you'll make a lot of people happy.
Angus: Once they hear this, I'm sure. We've provided a kind of cure, I think.
Brian: Oh, it's going to bandage wounds! It's a corker! All these people feeling bad about not being able to go to concerts, so to hear something new is brilliant. I had a dream the other night about going to a concert and watching a guitarist come on stage and – bang! – hit the guitar as hard as he could. And I just went: "Woargh!" And how many other people would just love to see that day? But hey, it is what it is.

Every AC/DC album begins with a real banger, and *Power Up* does exactly that with *Realize*.
Angus: Yeah. I remember the first time Malcolm played me his idea of it, and I said at the time: "You got some lyric ideas?", and he sung what he had to me. I wished I'd had a tape recording of that. But anyhow, it was so hooky it just stuck in my head, so it was easy to put it together.

> "Some of the songs are very cheeky. The humour of the band, you can never take that away."
>
> **– Brian Johnson**

And all the other songs on the album are ones you wrote with Malcolm?
Angus: All these ideas that are on there are from Mal and me, yeah. Through the years we had a lot of stuff, the two of us, ideas that we worked on together. Some songs nearly completed and other ones that needed a bit more finishing here and there. But it was all marked out, the stuff that we wanted to get recorded. That's what we'd done all the way through. We put ticks next to the material that we felt would be good AC/DC stuff. So that's how this album came together. They were all good ideas, and I thought, well, I hope Mal approves of the way I've put the stuff together.

Was there anything that Malcolm recorded that made it on to the album?
Angus: Him actually playing, no. Not that. I think that would be a bit spooky, actually.

Who wrote the lyrics?
Angus: A lot of the titles and also some of the lyric ideas were from Mal, the rest from myself.
Brian: A lot of these songs are wonderfully mischievous. And singing these cheeky lyrics, I've never had so much fun. I had a smile on my face

when I was putting them down. I love that, and I think the fans will love it. The music is powerful, but some of the songs are very cheeky. The humour of the band, you can never take that away.

There is something missing on this album, though. There is a long tradition of AC/DC songs with 'rock' or 'rock'n'roll' in the title: *Rock 'N' Roll Singer, Let There Be Rock, Rock And Roll Ain't Noise Pollution, For Those About To Rock*. There were four such songs on *Rock Or Bust*. But none on *Power Up*.

Angus [laughing]: Well, it's just what comes out, you know? Sometimes you have a track and you write down a title and you've used that word 'rock', and you can't get anything else that will fit it better. But don't worry, I've got bags full of ideas for songs, and all of them have got the word 'rock' in them.
Brian: And you've got to remember, 'rock' is a very hard word to rhyme – without getting into trouble.

Did you record tracks live, with the whole band going at it together?

Angus: Basically. We've always pretty much gone in and done the backing tracks with the full band.
Brian: And these boys… Phew, talk about tight!

There's such a positive energy in the album. Is that how it felt when you were making it?

Brian: Yes, absolutely.
Angus: That's what the whole project was. It felt good to be in there, working, and us all being back together and playing away.

In that last comment there's a tacit admission from Angus: that by having the old gang back together the new AC/DC album is legitimate, the genuine article. Without Cliff, Phil and especially Brian, it would not have the same measure of authenticity. Nor would it have the same depth of feel – the rock-solid grooves laid down by Cliff and Phil, the smoky character in Brian's voice. For all Chris Slade's qualities, Phil Rudd always was and always will be the definitive AC/DC drummer. Likewise Cliff Williams as their bassist. And while Axl Rose proved to be an inspired 'super-sub' on the *Rock Or Bust* tour – nailing every high note, and coolly standing aside as Angus ran the show – there is no doubt that Brian is the only man who should be singing for AC/DC.

From beginning to end, the *Rock Or Bust* tour was surely the most bizarre episode in the history of AC/DC – or AXL/DC, as it was jokingly rechristened when Rose got on board. It was also a period in which Brian hit rock bottom.

> "Everybody loves rock'n'roll, and by crikey the world needs it right now, my son!"
> – Brian Johnson

Let's start with the moment in 2015, during the *Rock Or Bust* tour, when Brian realised he had a problem.

Brian: At the time it was horrible. I really felt I was letting the band down on stage. Because I couldn't hear the tone of the guitars, I couldn't get my pitch or key. You felt helpless. And of course, the band's being let down, the fans are being let down… It's just not fair. I never wanted to be dead weight.
Angus: Brian got a lot of advice from the medical side, and they were pretty much saying if you continue you're going to go stone deaf, so that's also part of it. We didn't want that.
Brian: That's what Angus and Cliff said: "We do not want to be responsible for anything that happens to you. We would feel awful forever."

Brian, when you came off that tour did you think, deep down, that your time with the band was over?

Brian: Initially, yeah. And of course it's a difficult time for anybody who has to stop doing what they love. That's not easy. But you do it. You've got to man up and just shut your mouth and don't talk to anybody, which I didn't, and just ride it out. In my case, I buried my head in a bottle of whisky for the first month. It was quite numbing [laughs]. And I'm not on social media, so I don't read anything, I don't watch anything. I've never been on it and I've stuck off it. And I've found that I'm a quite sensible, rounded man who can take things on the chin.

Angus, what made you decide to carry on with the *Rock Or Bust* tour without Brian? Was it an old-fashioned sense of 'the show must go on'?

Angus: It was an unknown situation, and there was a lot there to think about. You're on tour, you've got a whole big machine with you, and you don't know how Brian's situation is going to play out. Well, maybe if we got somebody, another singer, we might be able to finish off those dates. I thought there probably wouldn't be a chance to regroup for a long time, so it was best maybe that we get it done and get through it. But when something like that happens, I don't think there is any great solution where everyone comes off happy, I guess.
Brian: You did the right thing.

There was widespread disbelief when Axl was announced as Brian's replacement, not least because Axl had only recently reunited with Slash and Duff McKagan for a Guns N' Roses tour.

Angus: Well, Axl contacted our people and said he could help us out. He had his own commitments, but he said if it doesn't interfere with what he was doing he'd fill in. And we thought, well, give it a shot and see what happens.

The general consensus seems to be that Axl did a great job.

Angus: Yeah. As I said, he was very generous to say: "Hey, I'll help out." And me personally, I've got to give him credit, and the band will be forever grateful that he did that. And remember, he broke his toe, so he was very lucky, I guess, to have Dave Grohl lend him a chair so he could sit on stage. He gave it his best shot, you know?

It also seemed that Axl learned an important lesson from AC/DC. When he went back to Guns N' Roses, he went on stage on time.

Angus [laughing]: You'd be surprised! He's a very pro guy. Every night he was there earlier than us. ⊳

ALAMY

Axl Rose, standing in for Brian Johnson, and Angus on the *Rock Or Bust* tour.

Brian, what did it take to get you singing again, without further damage to your hearing? And why are there limits to what you can say about your treatment?
Brian: It's non-disclosure stuff, because it's brand new. What I can tell you is I worked for three years with his lovely old fella and thankfully it worked. I think [laughs]. It took a while. But it was just magical. It could have been smoke and mirrors, but it wasn't, it was the real deal. So we'll go forward with him. I'm still working with him. And I've got my fingers crossed.

Well the new album proves that you can still sing like you've had a truck dropped on your foot.
Brian: Correct!
Angus: He could always hit the high notes.

Cliff's retirement didn't last very long, did it?
Angus: Ha, I guess not. I don't know what he wants to do in the future. I think the touring thing is more difficult for him. But he was really happy doing the album.

Presumably, without getting into too much personal detail, Phil Rudd has put his recent troubles behind him?
Angus: Yeah. He had a rough time that he's gone through. But he had help – professional help – and he's really got himself together. Malcolm always wanted Phil on board. And when I thought about it, Phil was the drummer in AC/DC that I've always felt comfortable with through the years.

And now there's Stevie. As you once said, Angus: "Stevie's like Malcolm, a real rhythm player. Like Keith Richards." Is it all about feel?
Angus: Yeah. Always. I'll do a rough idea of how I think Mal would do his part, and then we'll work it out, Stevie and me, to get the right feel for the track.

This is the AC/DC line-up that the fans wanted.
Brian: It's the right dynamic. It proves the band has a special bond. It's exciting. And when it gets together, somehow it brings this lovely music.

> "Malcolm was always practical and a very strong character. He always used to say: 'You plough on.'"
>
> **– Angus Young**

Back in 1980, an evocative line was written about AC/DC when they headed out on the *Back In Black* tour: "The ghost of Bon Scott rides with AC/DC." Forty years on, during the making of *Power Up* there was, as Angus says, the feeling that Malcolm Young's spirit was with them. But it's Brian who reveals an unexpected twist, in a song from the new album – lyrics in which Angus writes about Malcolm, albeit in oblique terms.

In all the years they were together, the two brothers were never much inclined to sentiment. The plain black cover of the *Back In Black* album was a memorial to Bon. But mostly, when speaking of him, Malcolm and Angus would rarely touch on the emotional impact of Bon's death, reverting instead to anecdotal stuff, tales of the singer's wild life, the boozing and the women.

In contrast, a photo on the *Rock Or Bust* album carried great poignancy. Although Malcolm was still alive when the album was released, it was public knowledge that his work with the band was done. The photo of his and Angus's signature guitars side by side, Malcolm's Gretsch and Angus's Gibson SG, had a powerful emotional quality. And in the new song *Through The Mists Of Time* there is, as Brian suggests, a sense of loss in the words written by Angus. "That song is just a beautiful story," Brian says. "Every time I listen to it, I get goosebumps, thinking of Malcolm. I'm just telling you the truth."

Asked whether that song is a eulogy for his brother, Angus backs off a little, a trace of unease in his voice. "It's just a ride through time, in a kind of way," he says. "A bit of a journey." He won't be drawn on any further detail. Instead he says that the lyrics to a rock song should be left open to interpretation. At which point, for a suitable comparison, he makes the surprising mental leap from low to high art: "It's like the Mona Lisa. People still argue today – is it a smile?" Inevitably, this comment is the cue for a couple of jokes.

"I don't know where we sit in culture," Angus says. "We are a kind of culture. Not bacteria…"

"The only culture I've got is a tub of yoghurt in the fridge." Brian adds, without missing a beat.

When the conversation returns again ⊳

MAIN: ASHLEY MAILE/ICONICPIX; ANGUS & AXL: ALAMY

"You thought AC/DC was over, didn't you?" Angus has a point to make.

to Malcolm, there's more laughter from them, more funny stories to tell, mixed with moments of quieter reflection, memories of a man who gave everything he had to AC/DC.

Is it true, Angus, that Malcolm told you to keep the band going as long as you can? Didn't he say that to you near the end?
Angus: Yeah, he always pushed. That was how he was. He was always practical and a very strong character. He always used to say: "You plough on." Even in times when we were young. When we were playing those early shows, some of the audiences in those places were really rough and rowdy. I'd go: "Am I going on there with my school shit on?" [laughs]. And he was always the one saying: "Hey, I'm right behind you, I'm right here."

Didn't he say that to you one time just before he gave you a kick in the arse to get on stage?
Angus: Yeah! He pulled a trick on me. He said: "You'll be fine, we'll just peek behind this curtain to see if you'll be okay." And as I was peeking behind the curtain I got a boot and I was on!

There was so much power in the way you played together. What was the secret to that?
Angus: It was just that two of us were always a unit together. It was Malcolm's idea in the beginning to put together the AC/DC band, and when I was younger I was kind of shocked that he even asked me to join. We used to do our own little thing, you know? So from that point on it was the two of us together and we worked as that one unit and tried to do our best and make it one big guitar.

> "I was kind of shocked that Malcolm even asked me to join. We used to do our own little thing..."
>
> – Angus Young

Can you describe this sense that Malcolm's presence is still with you?
Angus: I guess it comes from when I'm playing. After all those years of how it had to be and how I had to play, working with Mal all that time, I've got this in-built thing. Some of that also comes from my other brother, George, who also passed away not long ago. He was also a big part of my life. As you know, he did a lot of the early albums with Bon and Mal and myself and Phil, and he always had this attitude about guitar playing. I remember the first time I was in a studio, and George said to me: "Don't tickle it, play it".

That sounds like something that Malcolm would say.
Brian: You know, I was always amazed when we'd have all these guitarists coming backstage, fellow

pros and all that, and they'd always say to Malcolm: "How do you get that sound?" They were always fascinated by it, this heavy sound. They kept asking and asking, and Mal used to say to them: "There ain't no secret. Just hit 'em harder, mate!"

How tough is it, emotionally, to carry on without Malcolm?
Angus: Well, even when we did the last tour, *Rock Or Bust*, I'd go up the front of the stage, and it's one of those things – every now and again you do a bit of a flip because I think I feel him there, you know?
Brian: That's a lovely sentiment, Ang. And for me, knowing this fella for, like, thirty-six years, what I remember is standing right there with him on stage, and how we used to wink at each other at certain times, or smile, you know?

Is that how you remember him best – on stage, blasting out those riffs, driving the band on?
Brian: Aye. There's one thing I always remember about Mal. We'd get to the end of a song and his arms would be pumping, and I used to watch his guitar pick bend like a band-saw going through a plank of wood.
Angus: I saw that in *For Those About To Rock*. You'd see it going, his pick…
Brian: You could see this plastic powder coming off that fucking thing. I used to catch it in the spotlight. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to see it. And I used to look and think: "How does he do that?"

Do all of the band feel, as Angus does, that Malcolm's spirit lives on in AC/DC?
Brian: Yeah. It's like Ang says, every now and again I turn and he's not there. But this feeling we have, it's just one of those strange things in life. It's wonderful. You just have this feeling that he's keeping an eye on people.
Angus: He certainly is.

Even before the release of *Power Up*, 2020 was already a landmark year for AC/DC, marking the fortieth anniversaries of both the death of Bon Scott and the release of *Back In Black*. "I always remember Bon," Angus says. "I don't have to have a special day for it. I always think of him."

For Brian, there are mixed emotions when talking about Bon, with whom he toured in the early 70s, when Bon was fronting the group Fraternity, prior to joining AC/DC, and Brian was the singer with British band Geordie. There is a trace of sadness in Brian's voice as he pays tribute to Bon. "He was larger than life. Just this great singer, wordsmith, frontman – you name it, he had it." But when he thinks back to the making of *Back In Black* – begun just two months after Bon's death – what he remembers above all else is the sheer excitement of what was for him a life-changing experience. "It was the happiest six weeks I ever had," he says. "It was something new happening for me. It was just a joy. And when the album was done… well, bloody hell, it was great. And that was that. That was the end of civilian life as we know it."

> "I thought I would never, ever go in and do another album. But I did, and to come back it was fantastic."
>
> **– Brian Johnson**

Looking to the future, both Brian and Angus are itching to get back on stage. Beyond that there's nothing written in stone. Only one thing is certain: that Angus will continue to stick by those three little words that Malcolm repeated to him year after year, like a mantra: "You plough on."

The dream that Brian mentioned he had recently, about watching a rock'n'roll show, it's pretty obvious what that says about your frame of mind right now.
Brian: Oh yeah. I can't wait to get out there every night and bust some chops.
Angus: Yeah! The quicker the world gets back to normal…

Do you have to get in shape ahead of a tour, or are you always fighting fit?
Angus: I do a little bit before. I get myself psyched up. I don't like to overdo it, though. I might spend a couple of weeks getting the rust out of me. But it doesn't really matter how much exercise I've done before, always after the first night I go: "Jeez…" [laughs]. The next day I'll be stiff and sore, but from then on I'm into battle shape.

It's difficult to imagine you going jogging.
Angus: I'm not a jogger, no. I just do a little bit of skipping with a rope. I used to watch Muhammad Ali do that, and I thought if it's good enough for him it's good enough for me!

One of the best AC/DC shows ever filmed must be the one in Buenos Aires in 2009, featured on the DVD *Live At River Plate*.
Brian: Oh, whenever I see that, the part where me and Angus are out there in the middle, two little fellas at the end of this walkway, and these thousands of people jumping up in unison… I mean, holy shit, just look at them. No wonder we're smiling there. Well, I don't know if it was a smile, or just fear!

When you play to an audience like that do you forget about any aches and pains you might have in your bones?
Angus: Oh yeah. You don't feel it when you're doing it. It's usually afterwards.

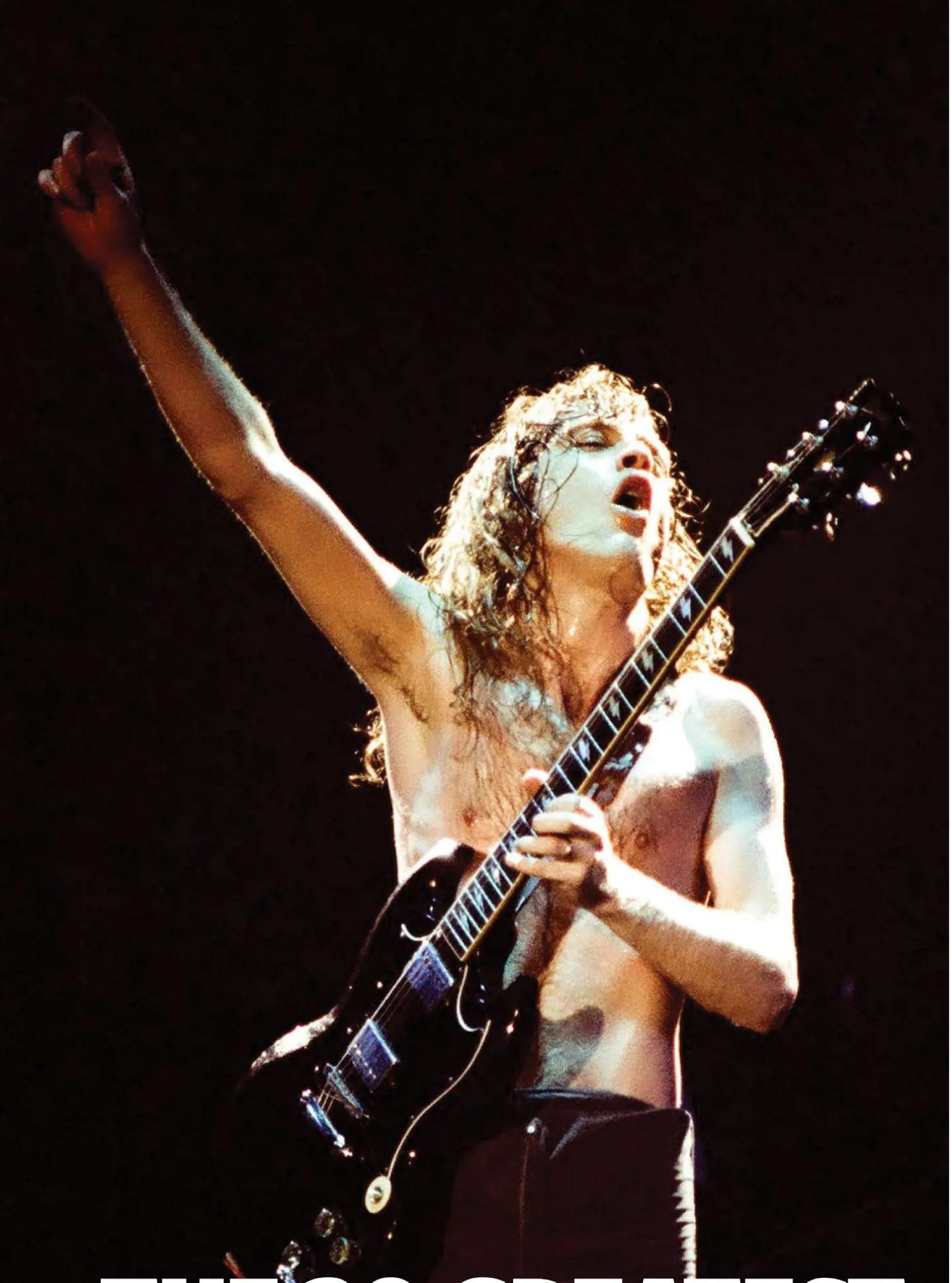
So you're planning a tour, but then what? Angus, you've said you have more songs in the bag, but realistically is *Power Up* likely to be the last AC/DC studio album?
Angus: I've no crystal ball. Whatever you do, you do it, it's done, and what comes in the future you hope is good. But you never know how life is. We've no road map for life. I wish we did, but we don't.

While recording the new album were there times when you thought you had to make the most of it?
Brian: I think you should, always. I think for everybody, that's a great lesson in life. Like Ang said, you've no crystal ball, so whatever you're doing you should grab it with both hands. For me, I thought I would never, ever go in and do another album. But I did, and to come back it was fantastic. I got the opportunity and I'm very grateful for it, it's as simple as that. And I enjoyed it ten times more than normal because I didn't ever think I would do it again. When you listen to this album you can tell that I loved doing it. And I hope it's not the last, that's all I can say.

Will there be an AC/DC as long as Angus is still standing?
Angus: Well, as I say, I've got no crystal ball. But as Malcolm used to say: "You're like the Titanic – when the ship goes down, the band goes down with it."

But for now it's good to have AC/DC back.
Angus: Yeah, it's a good thing. The world gets another good old hard shock of AC/DC.
Brian: That's what we all need.

You can explore AC/DC's 50th Anniversary gear at shop.acdc.com/ac-slash-dc-50th-anniversary



THE 30 GREATEST AC/DC SONGS – EVER!

AS CHOSEN BY THE STARS.

WORDS: KEN SHARP, MALCOLM DOME, DAVE LING & JERRY EWING

GETTY

30 ROCK'N'ROLL TRAIN

From Black Ice, 2008

A simple beat, a simple guitar riff and even simpler lyrics. Yup, AC/DC are back, with a good time groove and a belter of a rock single, proving there's only one way to rock.

RANDY BACHMAN, Bachman Turner Overdrive
Like all the fans I'm excited about the new AC/DC album. Rather than pick an old fave like everyone else is doing, I would pick *Rock'N'Roll Train* from their new release. Again, it illustrates their uncanny ability to make the basic three chord essence of rock'n'roll into something new and fresh. You fall into the groove and can immediately sing along and play your dashboard drums and air guitar. Long live AC/DC.

ROSS HALFIN

29 FIRE YOUR GUNS

From The Razors Edge, 1990

A short sharp burst or primeval power from the band's most polished album. A taut reminder of what AC/DC felt they were about amidst the clamour for hit singles like *Money Talks* and *Thunderstruck*.

RYAN O'KEEFE, AIRBOURNE
From a drummer's perspective, *Fire Your Guns* is pretty hard to beat. Being from *The Razor's Edge* [1990] it's not one of their better-known songs, but I love it. It was also recorded at Donington [in 1991, appearing on the *Live At Donington* DVD, 1992], and that's better still. As one of the band's faster tracks, It shows a good side of AC/DC – I love it when they up the tempo and really let rip. On record it's really good, but live it's incredible.

28 HELL AIN'T A BAD PLACE TO BE

From Let There Be Rock, 1977

Always prefaced live by Angus presenting his devil's horns, this song may have got the band in trouble with the clergy, but in fact relates to the mundanities of life on the road.

GINGER, The Wildhearts
My god how you pick *one* 'DC track?!? The riff of *Riff Raff* that feels so satisfying when you learn to play it. The memories of snogging in the youth club disco while *You Shook Me All Night Long* played in the background. Experiencing the cannons every night on tour with them on *For Those About To Rock*. The live version of *The Jack* with the rude lyrics…

AC/DC have been the soundtrack to most of the great memories in my life. But I have to choose *Hell Ain't A Bad Place To Be* because it's just my favourite. No reason really, it just goes to all the places I want a rock song to go to. Band tight as fuck, Bon being awesome, huge riff… tick, tick, tick. They're just fucking amazing in every way, aren't they?

27 IF YOU WANT BLOOD

From Highway To Hell, 1979

The title track of DC's 1978 live album, and later immortalised in song on the following *Highway To Hell* album. It was reinstated to the band's live set on the *Stiff Upper Lip* tour.

FRANK BELLO, Anthrax
Its got an amazing guitar riff matched up with great vocals from Bon Scott that makes you want to break something near you.

26 IT'S A LONG WAY TO THE TOP (IF YOU WANT TO ROCK 'N' ROLL)

From T.N.T., 1975

Opening blast of the band's second album, heralding their

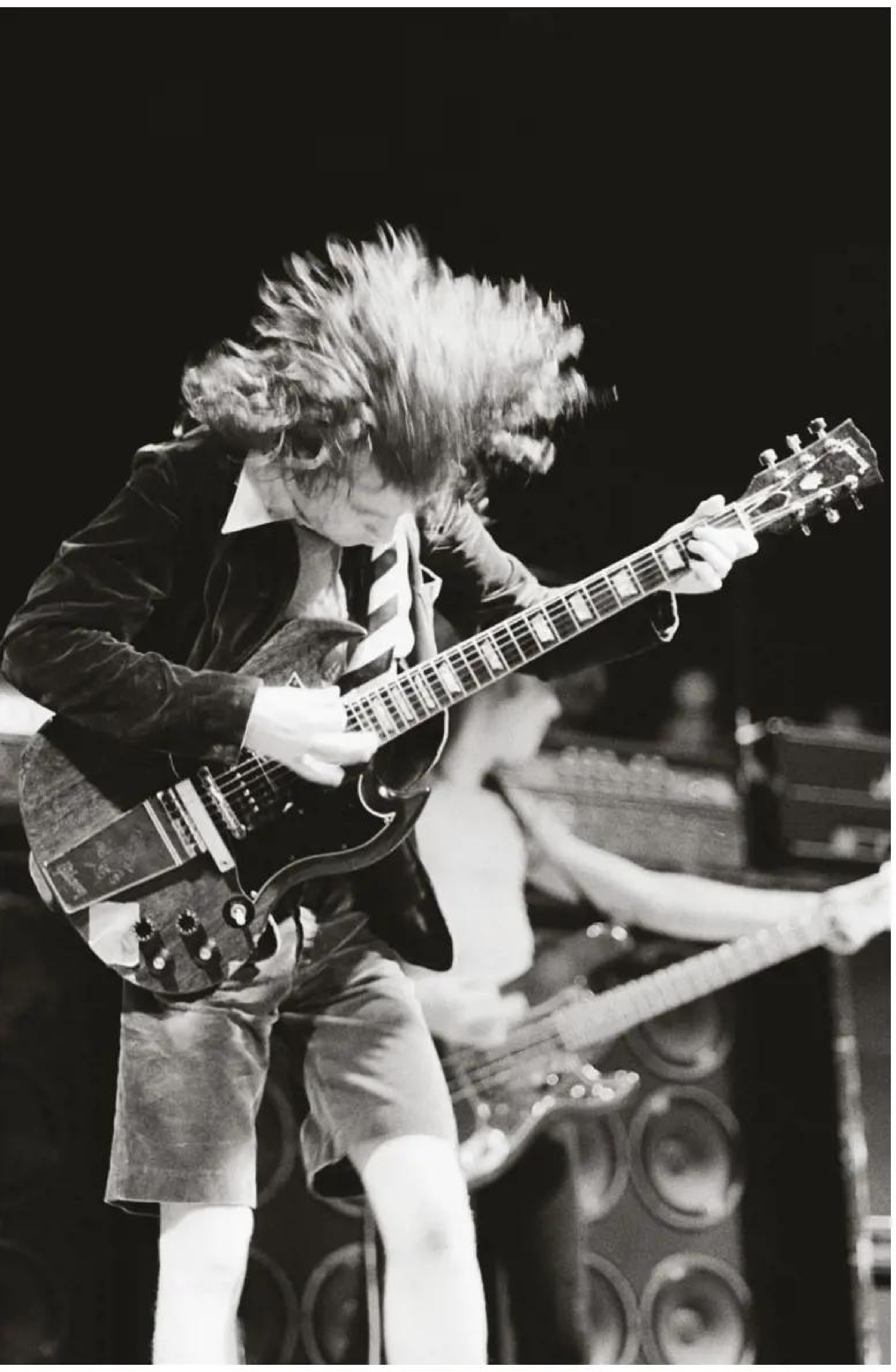
"Bon Scott had that rare blend of menace and humour." And a canoe in his pocket…

RON POWNALL/FRANK WHITE AGENCY

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

Scottish roots with bagpipes. A much covered tale of what life was going to be like for the fledgling band, the video, featuring the Rats Of Tobruk Pipe Band, was shot in what is now AC/DC Lane in Melbourne. Last performed live in 1979.

ALEX SKOLNICK, Testament
Musically, it features one of the best guitar riffs ever written, and a clever use of two guitars, something which was new to hard rock at that time. Malcolm Young is highly underrated as a rhythm player, and Angus Young, while one of the most visible figures in rock, is actually underrated as a soloist. He has a feel, tone and technique that should be studied by more guitar players. As if that's not enough, these guys throw bagpipes into the mix. Bagpipes! Something that should be so uncool and unrock becomes totally metal. It's one of those songs that will uplift you, no matter what mood you're in.



25 NIGHT PROWLER

From Highway To Hell, 1979

Another song that landed the band in trouble, when it was linked to notorious US serial killer Richard Ramirez. The final track on *Highway To Hell*, it ends with Bon Scott's vocal tribute to the comedy TV show *Mork And Mindy*. Shazbot, Nanu Nanu!

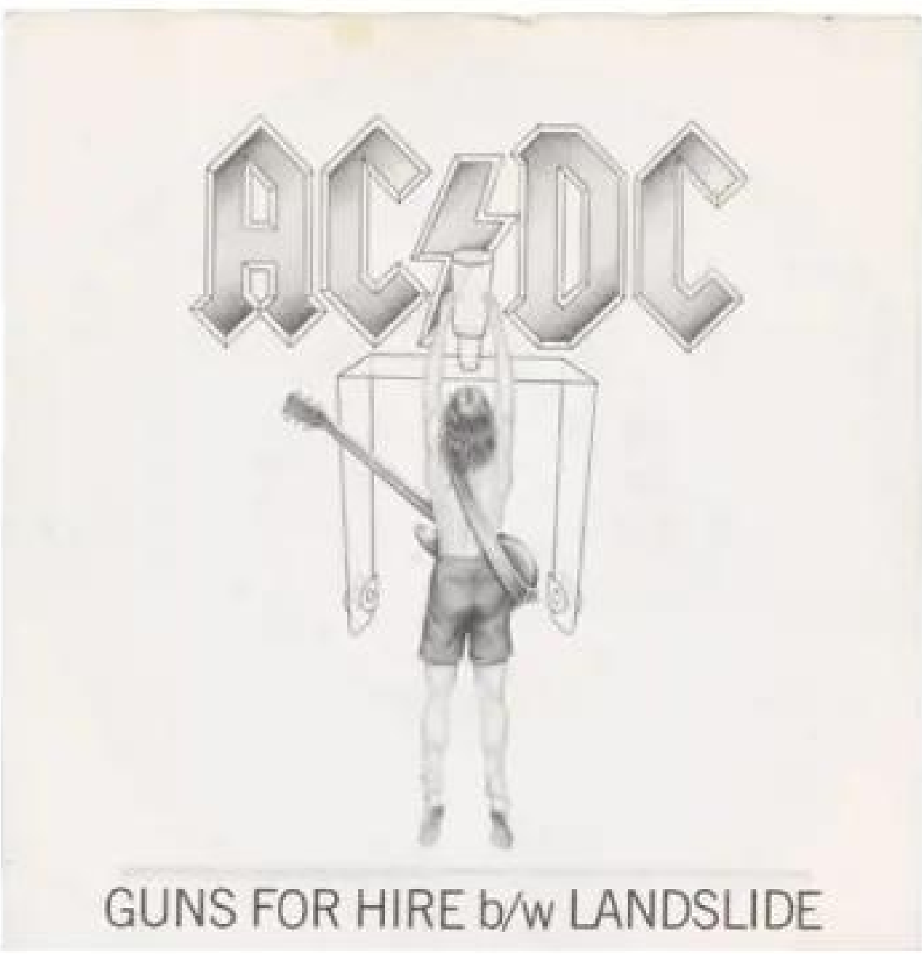
MATT PIKE, High On Fire
It's a little hard to elaborate on any one song; after all they are one of the greatest bands of all time. But I've always really liked *Night Prowler*. The mood is dark and bluesy, it gives you an eerie sort of feeling, and the guitars are tremendous."

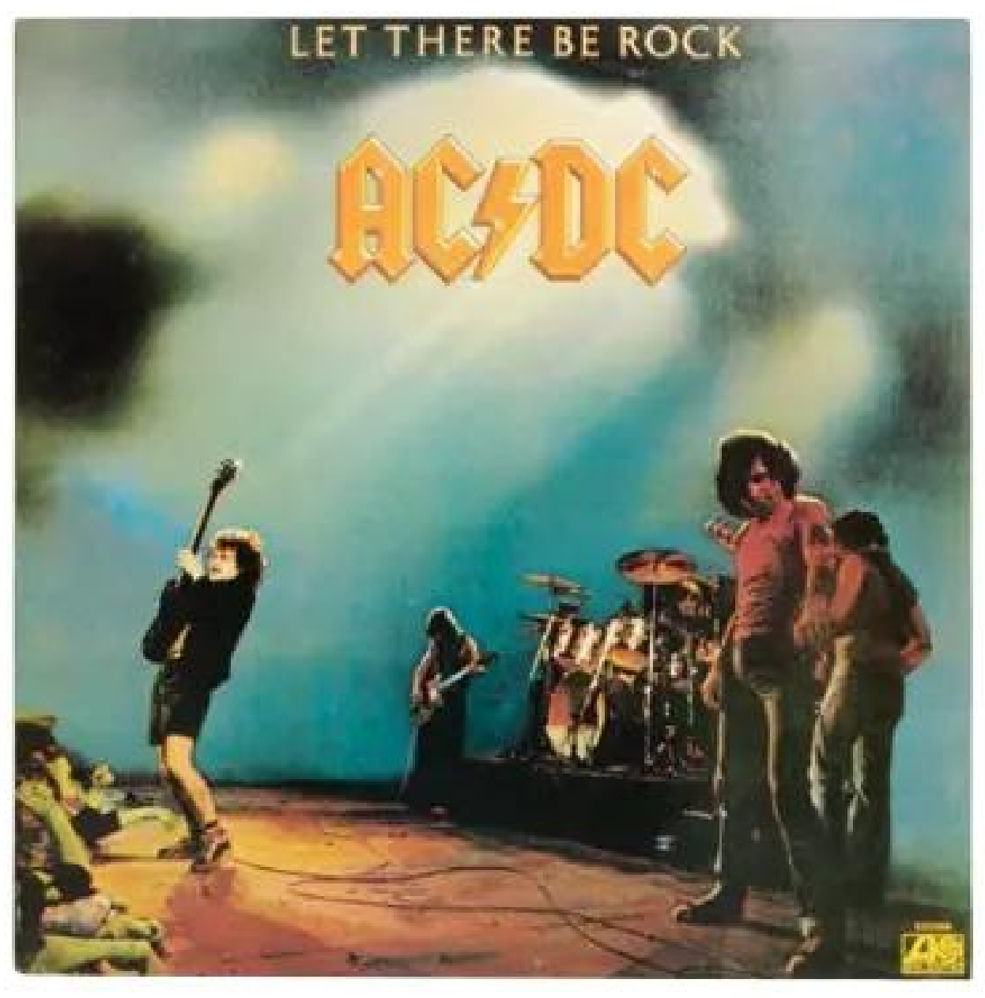
24 SQUEALER

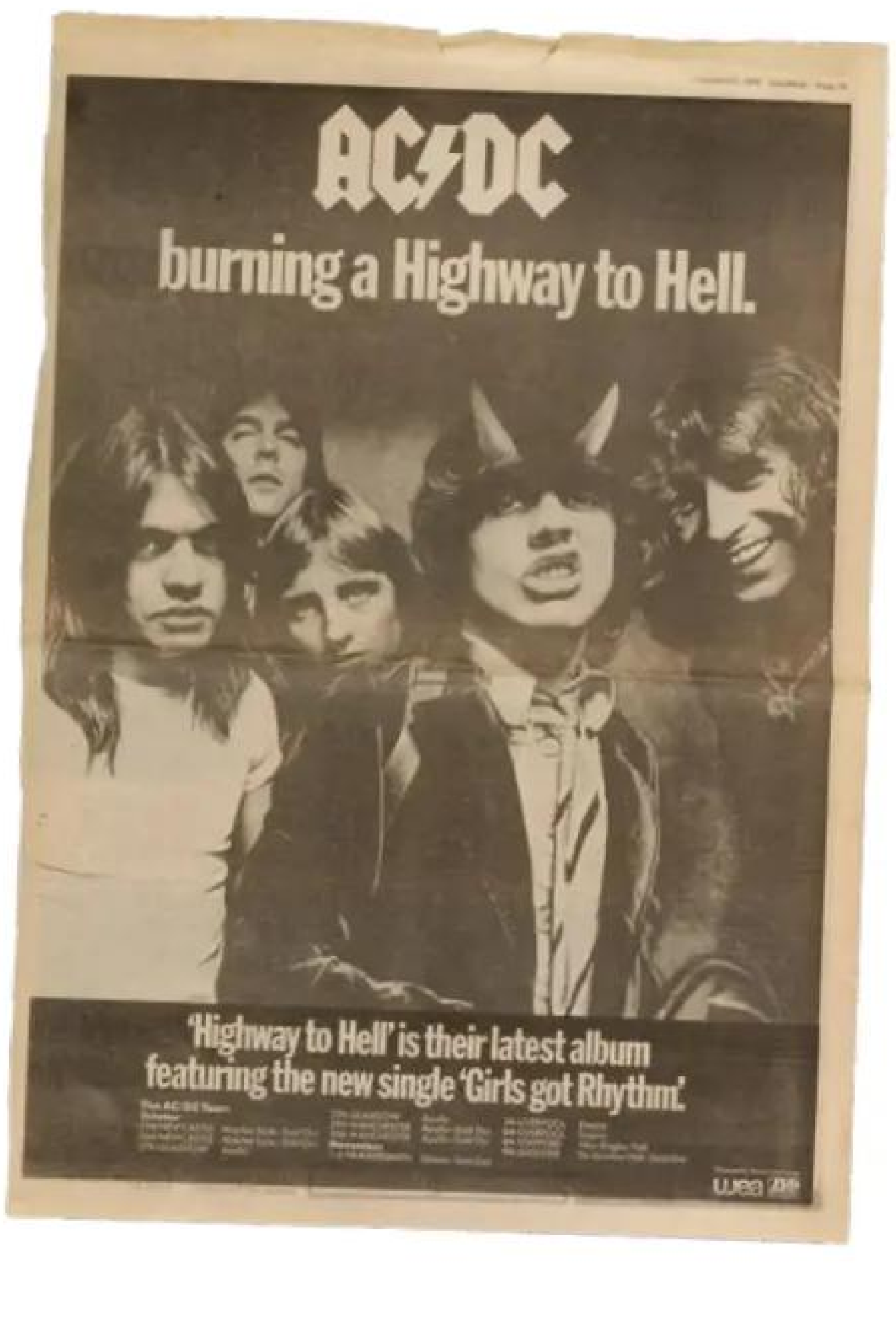
From Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap, 1976

Back in 1976 lurid tales relating how the innocence of youth could be corrupted were *de rigueur* for DC.

DWEEZIL ZAPPA
Here's what I love about AC/DC. They write and arrange songs so that they can deliver them to their audience with massive electric intensity. They have always focused on capturing the true raw sound of their instruments on all of their recordings. I really like a song from their first record. I've never heard it played on the radio or played live, it's called *Squealer*. In the solo, Angus pulls off one of the best examples of pinched harmonics ever recorded. There is so much attitude in that solo and I love his vibrato. I think it's his real sonic signature, it's instantly recognizable.







AC/DC

burning a Highway to Hell.

'Highway to Hell' is their latest album featuring the new single 'Girls got Rhythm'.

23 OVERDOSE

From Let There Be Rock, 1977

A slow-building rocker that ends up driving on relentlessly and telling the tale of one man's obsession with the lady in his life.

GUY GRIFFIN, The Quireboys
Overdose was the first AC/DC song I ever heard. I heard it when I was 11 years old. It changed everything there and then! Bon Scott had that rare blend of menace and humor in his lyrics and you could believe he actually lived that life. They came to London in the middle of the punk scene. They were more 'punk' than anything Malcolm McLaren could ever create – the real deal.

22 SHOOT TO THRILL

From Back In Black, 1980

Bon may have been the Shakespeare of smut, but with lines like *'I've got my gun at the ready, gonna fire at will'* new boy Brian Johnson proved he could leer with the best of them.

RACHEL BOLAN, Skid Row
Everything about *Shoot To Thrill* rocks! The energy. The

Classic 'DC: "The Who were dull by comparison"

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY IMAGES

lyrics. When Angus comes back in after the breakdown with the guitar line in the low register. Jeez! That lit me up the first time I heard it and it still lights me up now. Greatest air guitar line ever.

21 ROCK AND ROLL AIN'T NOISE POLLUTION

From Back In Black, 1980

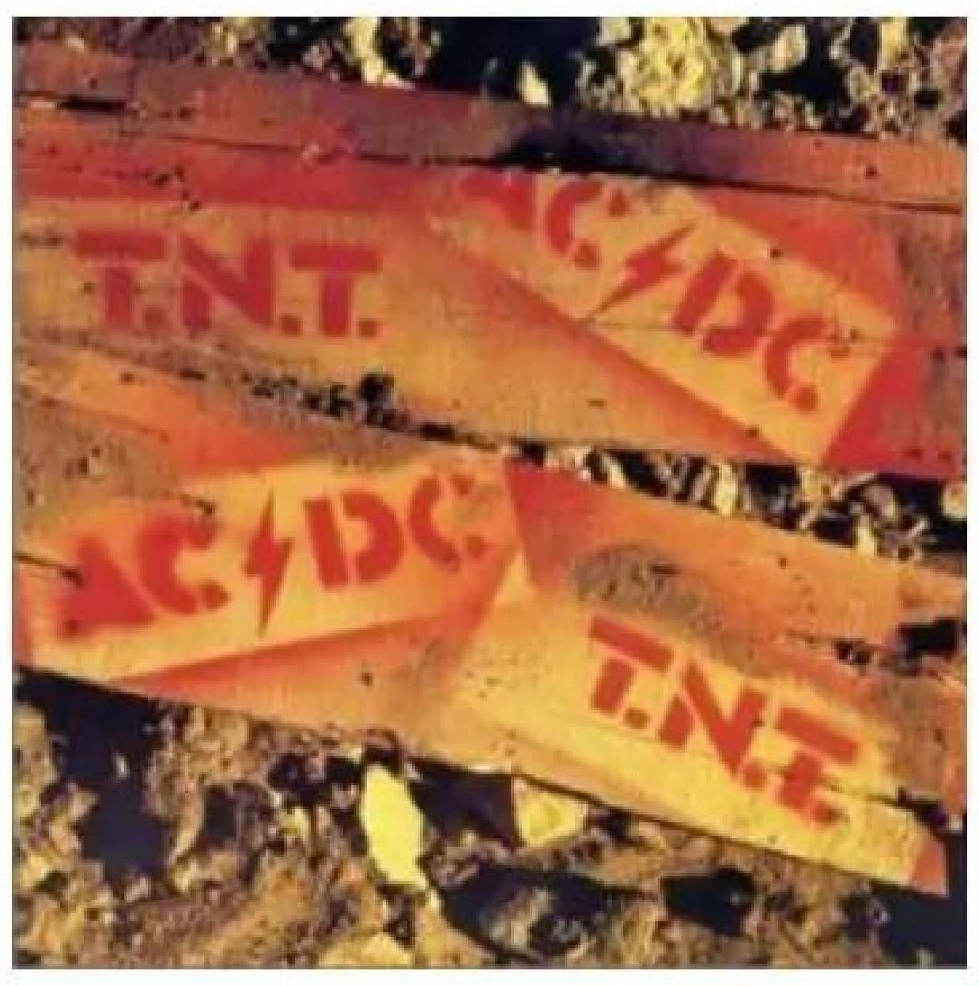
Like *Let There Be Rock, Rock And Roll Ain't Noise Pollution* is AC/DC's homage to their own brand of rock. The lyrics were made up on the spot in the studio and this slow rocker was the band's highest charting UK single (No.15) at the time.

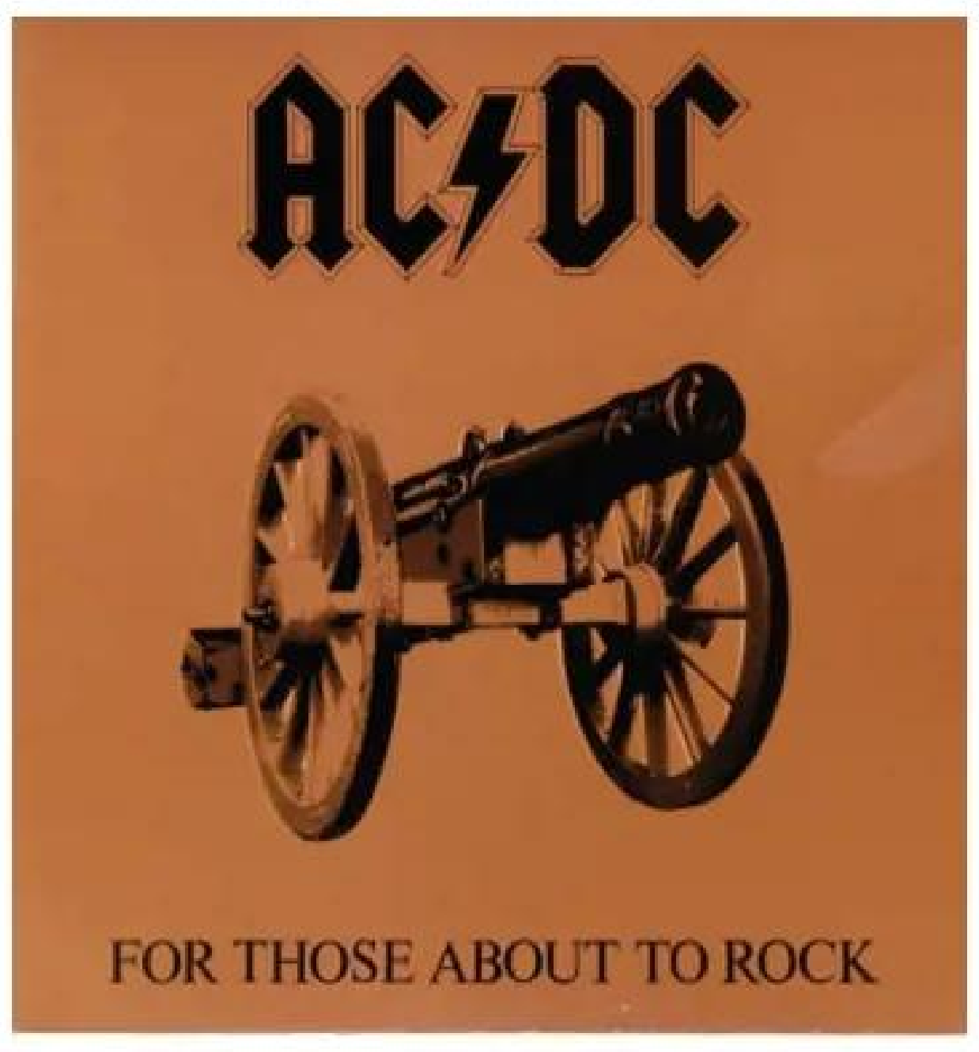
RIK EMMETT, Triumph
I used to help coach my son's baseball team, and he loved to crank the classic rock tunes in the car on the way to games. *Rock And Roll Ain't Noise Pollution* just had the best build of grinding rock guitars--such great, classic rock guitar sounds. Definitely to be enjoyed played *loud!*

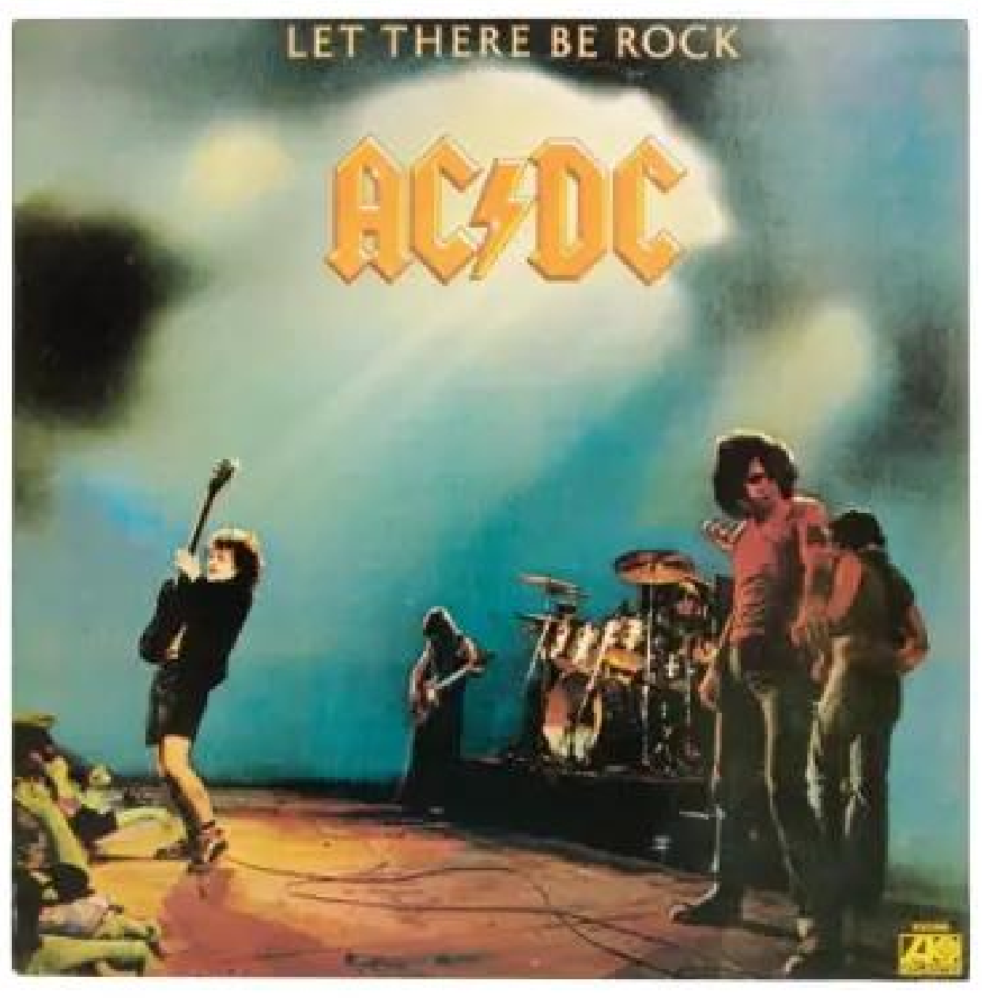
20 STIFF UPPER LIP

From Stiff Upper Lip, 2000

***'Now I warn you ladies, I shoot from the hip/ I was born with a stiff, a stiff upper lip.'* What can they mean? The title track from the band's 2000 album showed the Young brothers to be no strangers to smut and innuendo.**







DON BARNES, .38 Special
'Like a dog in a howl, I bite everything!'
When the band comes crashing in on that explosive intro of *Stiff Upper Lip*, it encapsulates everything that rock is supposed to be about. The tension that Angus has ramped up with his muted guitar intro drives right into the band's monster four on the floor stomp. I've got a big bang system in my house that I turn up to 11 just to feel the crash and attitude of what every little kid always dreamed about.

19 LET THERE BE ROCK

From Let There Be Rock, 1977

Awesome title track of the band's fourth album (and first to feature new bassist Cliff Williams), the song lays bare the band's philosophy about rock music and where it came from. The centre piece of AC/DC's enigmatic stage show ever since.

DANNY BOWES, Thunder
I saw AC/DC at Wembley Stadium when I wasn't very old. It was a lot of beers ago and I can't remember the exact year, but I remember AC/DC very well. The Who were headlining, and there were a few bands on the bill. AC/DC were on in the afternoon. They completely stole the show, and I have a vivid memory of Bon Scott carrying Angus on his shoulders into the crowd while he played the guitar solo. The Who were as dull as dishwater by comparison, and I loved The Who. *Let There Be Rock* always reminds me of that show, every single time I hear it, and that's how it should be, that's the power of a great live band. It has great melody, huge drama, adrenaline-fuelled excitement, oh and a fuck-right-off guitar riff. Marvellous.

18 TNT

From T.N.T., 1975

The pounding title track of the band's second album was an early indication that the band's name was derived from raw, electric power, rather than a hint at bisexuality, as some early Australia commentators suggested at the time.

JEAN PAUL GASTER, Clutch
Malcolm Young's rhythm guitar, along with the four-on-the-floor kick, makes for a real deep groove. When the snare drum finally comes in, it sounds so heavy. There are great lyrics here, too. Bon Scott could say anything and you would believe it. Nobody comes close to matching his tone or delivery. The same can be said for Angus' leads. The best players are the one who can pay homage to the tradition without losing their own identity. Angus does with ease. Then there's that weirdo free jazz ending. What's that about? These records are timeless. Killer production too!

17 WHAT'S NEXT TO THE MOON

From Powerage, 1978

An aggressive and somewhat ambiguous lyric from Bon Scott, telling the tale of a man taking retribution against his woman before getting nabbed. Only ever performed three times live, on the *Stiff Upper Lip* tour.

NEIL ZLOZOWER

> **"*Touch Too Much*, from my favourite AC/DC album, *Highway To Hell* is an amazing track. It's a sexy, driving song. Very good for strippers!"**
>
> TOMMY THAYER ON *TOUCH TOO MUCH*

REX FEATURES

> **“It’s not easy to pick a favourite AC/DC song, but it has to be *Walk Over You*. That song is the reason why everyone in the world should learn to play guitar.”**
>
> RICKY WARWICK ON *WALK OVER YOU*

BRENT HINDS, Mastodon
What’s Next To The Moon from the *Powerage* album is one of those songs that bring back great memories, and because of that it’s my favourite.

16 TOUCH TOO MUCH

From Highway To Hell, 1979

An early indication of the production technique of Mutt Lange and proof that AC/DC have always been able to pen a damn catchy pop tune.

ERIC SINGER, Kiss
Touch Too Much is a classic with Bon Scott and reminds me of why I always have loved this band. Classic riff, four on the floor drum beats and always a chorus that you can sing along to.

15 WALK ALL OVER YOU

From Highway To Hell, 1979

***‘Take off your heels and let down your hair/ Paradise ain’t that far from here.’* In Bon Scott’s eyes, one of the closest things AC/DC got to a love song.**

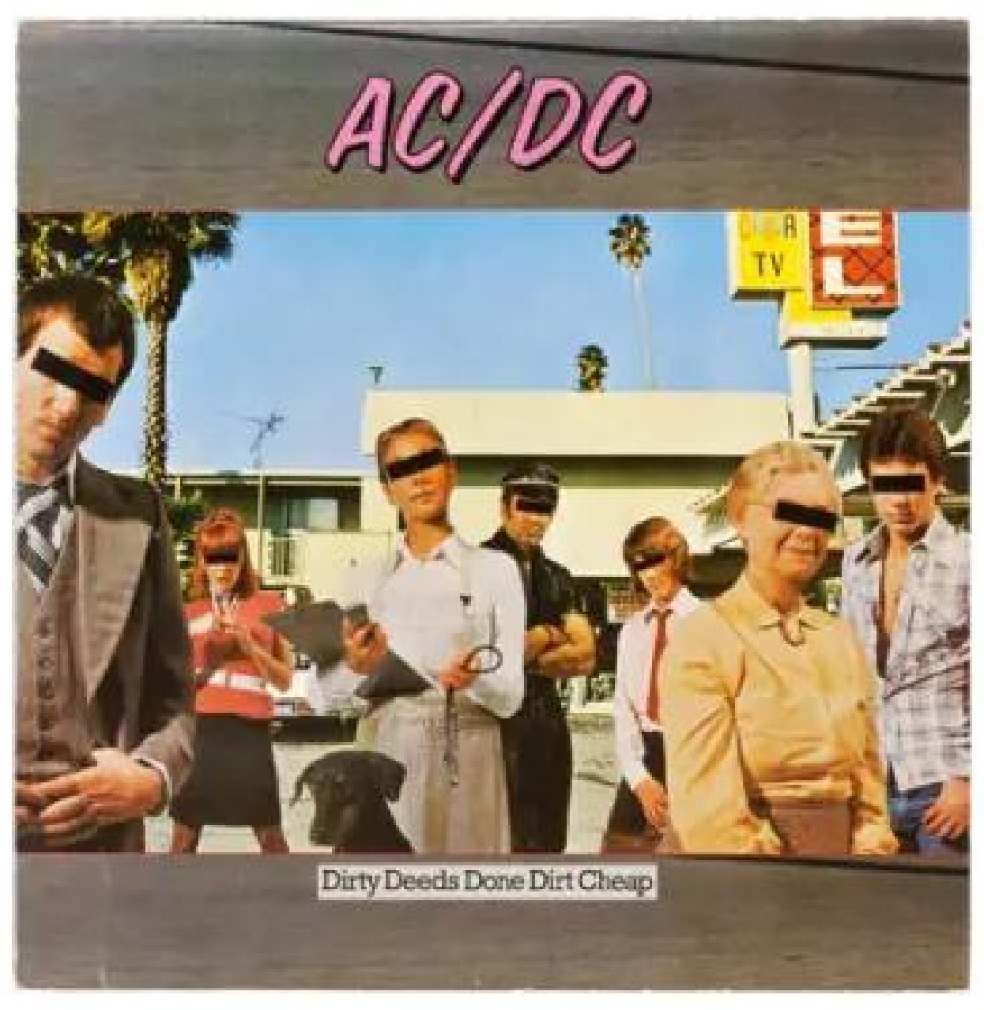
TRACII GUNS, LA Guns etc
Walk All Over You, from the Bon Scott era, is the sexiest rock song ever, from the riff to the lyrics, it’s dirty. From the Brian Johnson era my favorite is *Hells Bells*. If Beethoven wrote a rock song it would be *Hell’s Bells*.

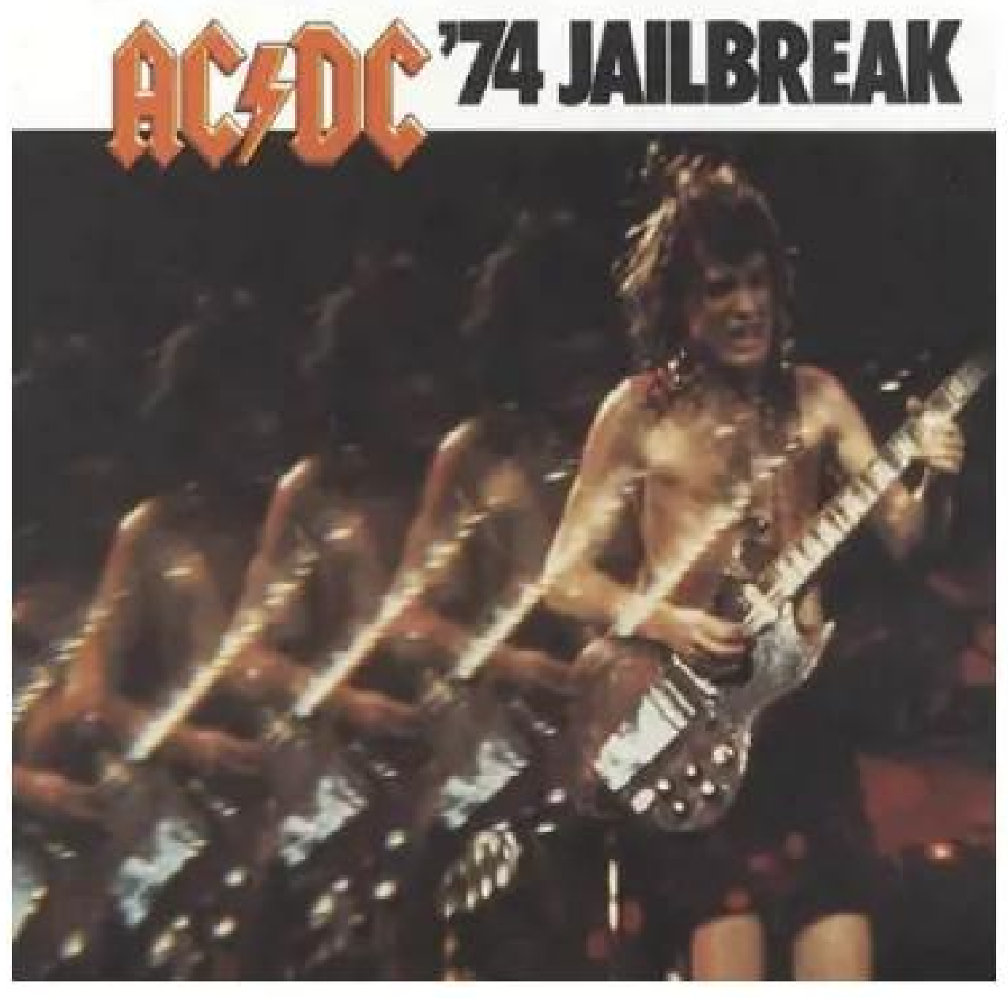
14 BIG BALLS

From Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap, 1976

With tongue firmly in cheek, Bon Scott’s wordplay runs riot on this chucklesome ode to all things testicular. You can almost see him grinning his way through the line *‘But when they’re held for pleasure they’re the balls that I like best’.*

AC/DC
POWERAGE





JIM BONFANTI, The Raspberries
I love the double-entendre lyrics, and the way Bon sings it with a touch of sleaze in his voice.

HIRSH GARDNER, New England
We were lucky enough to do some shows with them on Bon Scott’s last American tour before his death. I remember shaking when the band played this song in Fort Worth, Texas. Bon and Angus are the down and dirty Lennon and McCartney.

13 HELLS BELLS

From Back In Black, 1980

Oh how they teased us for a good minute and a bit, mournful bell tolling and all, as we waited to hear what new singer Brian Johnson sounded like. Enough to have outraged the God squad, but is in fact about a storm that hit Nassau as the band arrived to begin recording the new album.

BERNIE SHAW, Uriah Heep
Gotta be *Hell’s Bells!* Grinding riff, thumping bass line and a gargle with razor blades vocal! What more do you want (or need for that matter) from a great rock song? Nobody does it better than AC/DC. Fact.

12 JAILBREAK

From ’74 Jailbreak

Originally released on the Australian version of *Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap* but inexplicably left off of the international version. The tale of a man trying to escape from a life sentence was immortalised in a cheap and cheerful promo video featuring the whole band acting out the song’s tale.

> **“HELLS BELLS! GRINDING RIFF, THUMPING BASS LINE AND A GARGLE-WITH-RAZOR-BLADES VOCAL! WHAT MORE DO YOU WANT?”**
>
> Bernie Shaw

JUDAS PRIEST (by email)
Fave AC/DC song? Way too many, but *Jailbreak* works for us. When Priest was first starting out on dates through Europe, we had an invite to open for AC/DC on their first extensive tour in the 1970s. Those shows we did tgether enabled us to make our mark in Europe. Funny story is that, after our set, we would bale overnight in a Ford Transit (band and crew together) to make it in time for the next gig. The AC/DC guys thought we were being a bit stuck up not hanging around with them. When they found out the reason for our runners they said, ‘Get on our bus and enjoy!’. That’s the sort of good lads they have always been.

11 SIN CITY

From Powerage, 1978

Bon Scott’s ode to the lure of Las Vegas, the song features that rarity for AC/DC, a bass solo.

JOE PERRY, Aerosmith
I’d pick anything off *Powerage* but leaning towards *Sin City*. When our manager asked if we wanted to have AC/DC open for us I said, “No problem. No one could be that good live.” And they were. When Angus would drop to the floor, he’d do a couple of moves with his body flailing away. One we called “the frying bacon” where he laid down on his back and played. We’d often run from our dressing room and watch him do that from the side of the stage. The other one we called “the Curly dance”, which had him drop to his side and spin in a motion reminiscent of Curly from *The Three Stooges*.

BILLY CORGAN, Smashing Pumpkins
When Bon sang about going down to *Sin City* to get into God knows what, you knew absolutely without a doubt he knew what he was talking about.

MICHAEL ANTHONY, Van Halen
Sin City blazed on the VH tour bus all through Europe on our first tour. I think of that song every time I think of touring over there…

10 THUNDERSTRUCK

From The Razors Edge, 1990

About a time when a plane carrying guitarist Angus Young was struck by lightning, this slow building rocker was a massive hit for the band.

SCOTT GORHAM, Thin Lizzy
Thunderstruck has gotta be the AC/DC song for me. Great guitar playing, cool groove, and tight production. What more can you ask from a classic rock song?

JOE SATRIANI
Thunderstruck is unique in the way the Young

➳

As AC/DC get older the stage shows get bigger.

FRANK WHITE AGENCY

brothers arrange their guitars. The two main guitar riffs are syncopated, yet bone crunching. Their entire catalogue of recordings contain the most absolutely wonderful sounding electric guitars ever! How do they do that?"

Bon Scott: one of rock's great vocalists, and brimming with charisma.

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

9 PROBLEM CHILD

From Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap, 1976

Inexplicably, the song also crops up on some versions of 1977's Let There Be Rock! An anti-establishment hymn, Bon would tell audiences it was actually about Angus.

GLENN HUGHES
The song is *Problem Child*. This was the first song that brought me to their attention. Ozzy was over at my house back in '76, and we were watchin' the BBC and on comes this ballsy band, with a little lad in his school uniform. We both knew that they would go all the way, and this song stood out for me.

LEMMY, Motörhead
Problem Child. And the reason is because I like it!

KIM THAYIL, Soundgarden
We used to do *Problem Child* as part of our encore when we toured Europe in '89/'90. It has a cool riff, cool lyrics and a great groove, which pretty much describes all of AC/DC's songs.

8 GIRL'S GOT RHYTHM

From Highway To Hell, 1979

When Bon Scott sang "I've been around the world, I've seen a million girls..." you believed him. And were slightly jealous to boot. An unashamed paean to the glory of the finer sex, all in delightfully lurid detail.

PETER FRAMPTON
Girl's Got Rhythm – I love AC/DC so to chose one track is hard. I don't drive without AC/DC loaded on the iPod. It's the orchestral guitar parts that are so great for me. I've thought about wearing the shorts but I think I'll leave those to Angus!

7 DOWN PAYMENT BLUES

From Powerage, 1978

A wonderful driving blues number from *Powerage*, telling the tale of a man driven to debt trying to impress a lady. Simple, repetitive, but wholly effective.

SLASH, Velvet Revolver/Guns N' Roses
Down Payment Blues is one of my all time favorite AC/DC tracks from a catalogue of many favorites! But, this particular track is one of the most gritty and at the same time, one of the most melodically articulate AC/DC songs of all time. Plus, the premise of the lyrics read like my life story.

6 FOR THOSE ABOUT TO ROCK (WE SALUTE YOU)

From Those About To Rock (We Salute You), 1981

From bells to canons, but it wasn't about the gimmicks. The title is taken from the book *For Those About To Die, We Salute You*, about Roman gladiators that Angus had read. .

EDDIE OJEDA, Twisted Sister
For Those About to Rock has a great message, a great grove and production sound. From the slow menacing beginning to the cannon fire. It rocks! To me its AC/DC's *1812 Overture*.

STEVE PRIEST, Sweet
I was reading a book called *For Those About To Die We Salute You*, and it was about Roman gladiators. When they came out with that song I went, "My god, why didn't I think of that?!" What a great title, it's so obvious. What I like about AC/DC is they're not trying to educate anyone, they're just having fun.

5 DIRTY DEEDS DONE CHEAP

From Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap, 1976

Riotous title track from the band's third album, noted for being the only AC/DC song to feature a line (the title line towards the song's end) sung by Malcolm Young and also to feature backing vocals from brother Angus.

BIFF BYFORD, Saxon
As a fairly early convert to AC/DC, I discovered them in 1976. The simplicity of their guitar riffs was what really impressed me. They way they used those repetitive chords really changed my outlook on songwriting. That's where Saxon songs like *Wheels Of Steel, 747 (Strangers In The Night)* and *Strong Arm Of The Law* came from. It made such an impact on me I took the band to see them play in Sheffield in 1977. There wasn't a massive amount of people at the show, but those that did come were really pumped up.

CORKY LAING, Mountain
Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap is one of my faves. It has a great title, a great feel, an undeniably great vocal and a relevant title. And you can dance to it.

4 WHOLE LOTTA ROSIE

From If You Want Blood (You Got It), 1978

The definitive version comes from the band's first live album, featuring the crowd chants of "An-GUS!" during the opening riffing. Bon's lurid tale of loving a large lady.

TED NUGENT
These rabble rousing sons-a-bitches could have been from Detroit with all their hi-energy piss and vinegar, plus the intense soulfulness in their authoritative, animalistic throttling tight delivery. The boys have got it all – magic, infectious guitar signature theme line,

> **"The AC/DC song that stays with me is *You Shook Me All Night Long*. I love the manic energy, a good chorus and a great, great guitar riff..."**
>
> FREE'S ANDY FRASER ON *YOU SHOOK ME ALL NIGHT LONG*

> **"It's a love song to a fat girl, and fat girls need love too. It's one of their catchiest riffs ever. They really are flawless in their approach to rock'n'roll. If they were any more sophisticated, they'd lose their edge."**
>
> ALICE COOPER ON *WHOLE LOTTA ROSIE*

squaloring screaming banshee, defiant and believable lead vocals, pummeling black rhythm section and enough attitude for any 100 rock 'n roll bands. God bless AC/DC. They rock supreme. This song defines pure primal rock'n'roll.

3 YOU SHOOK ME ALL NIGHT LONG

From Back In Black, 1980

'*She was a fast machine, She kept her motor clean*' leered Johnson in a manner Bon Scott would have been proud of. Not the most politically correct song of all time!

KEITH EMERSON

They recorded *Back In Black* in the Bahamas when I was living there, and I got to know them pretty well – even took them out fishing in my boat. I impressed them by catching a 50-lb tuna. I'm not sure whether or not it was *You Shook Me All Night Long*, which is my favourite of theirs, but I have a great memory of Brian Johnson being out on the beach and someone sent a message saying it was time for him to go and dub a vocal. He went straight to the studio in his shorts and no matter what he did just couldn't get it right. With him being the new boy, the band were getting frustrated so Brian ran back to the hotel and changed into his stage gear, then sang it in one take.

RONNIE JAMES DIO

You Shook Me All Night Long is the ultimate kick ass anthem, showing how perfectly Brian Johnson made his presence known inside the band. It was a brilliant transition from the Bon Scott era to the AC/DC we know today.

2 HIGHWAY TO HELL

From Highway To Hell, 1979

Angus on the cover with devil's horns and a Satanic tail? *Highway To Hell?* Devil worshipping metallers eh? Nope, a song about what life is like being in a band. "I sometimes wear black underpants," retorted Angus when asked about the band's supposed fondness for Old Nick.

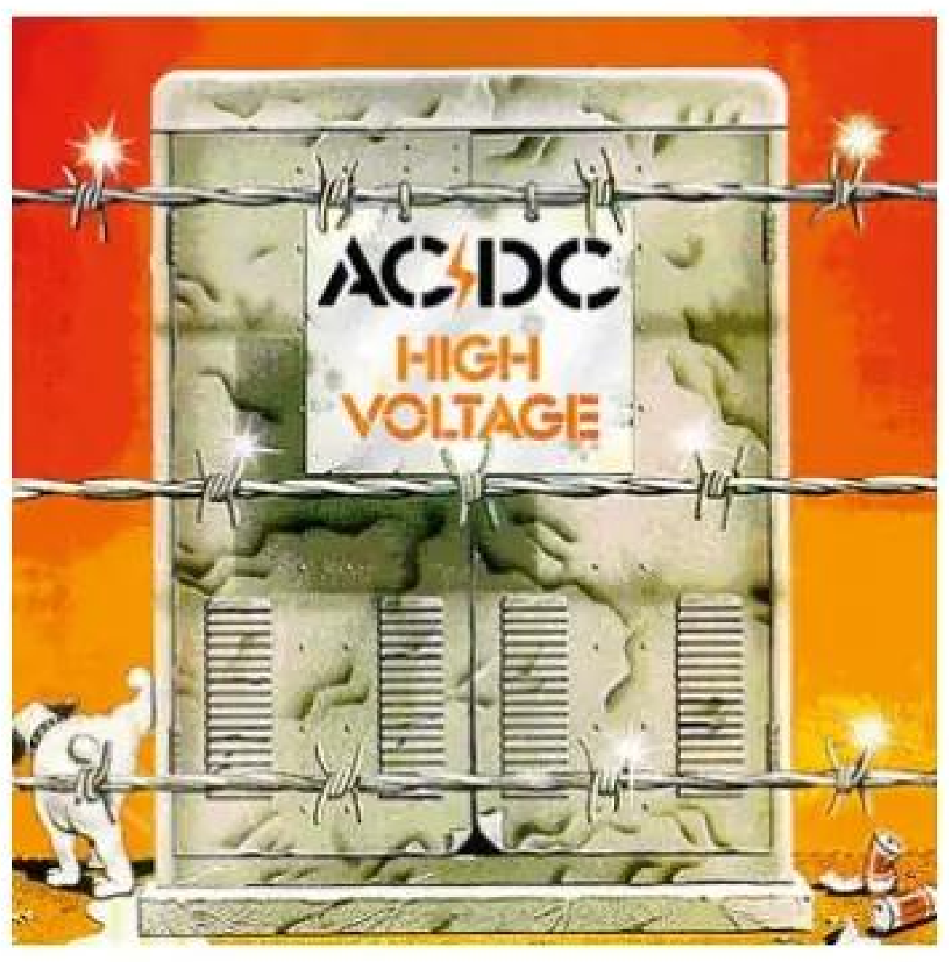
TOM ARAYA, Slayer

That song springs to mind because it reminds me of the first time I saw them on the American TV show *The Midnight Special* at the end of the 1970s. I couldn't believe my eyes when their scrawny little guitarist [Angus Young] spun around on his back like a maniac, then got on the singer [Bon Scott]'s shoulders. I thought, 'What the hell is that?' and went out and bought the album. They went on to become one of my favourite bands. I believe that their first five or six albums are all-time classics.

MICK BOX, Uriah Heep

I first heard *Highway To Hell* on the tour bus on the radio in the USA. It blew me away. The opening riff is so powerful and being on a bus which felt like we were actually on a highway to hell after three months of touring it all fell into place. A fantastic arena song that the crowd delight in shouting, singing and screaming along too. Angus is in the groove on the lead breaks and at one point it was never off American radio and it summed up the whole rock'n'roll lifestyle.

AC/DC
IF YOU WANT BLOOD



AC/DC
HIGHWAY TO HELL

MIKE LEVINE, Triumph

Bon at his best. Mutt Lange at his beginning. It redefined what a 4/4 beat could do in rock. It made tremendous in-roads at radio and elsewhere for hard rock bands in the late 70s. I loved this band despite the fact they absolutely hated opening for Triumph at Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis.

RICHIE RANNO, Starz

It's difficult to pick an AC/DC song because of their tremendous ability to write instantly catchy tunes. But, I'm going to pick *Highway To Hell* today even though I might have a different favorite tomorrow. This song is the number one rock anthem of all time. *'Rock'n'roll on the highway to Hell'* – why didn't I think of that first?

Bon Scott is one of the greatest front men/lead singers ever and Angus's solo is right on the money. Deservedly, one of the greatest rock groups in history.

CARL PALMER, ELP

I have a few favourite AC/DC songs, *Highway To Hell, Back In Black* and *Thunderstruck.*

MIKE RENO, Loverboy

I had met the guys in AC/DC over the years as they recorded a lot of their records, including their new one in Vancouver. Loverboy was asked to do a disaster relief concert in Fort Myers, Florida a few years back after a huge storm had hit the area. We were all backstage before the show and in the room it's myself, Robin Zander and Rick Nielsen from Cheap Trick. Brian Johnson from AC/DC, who was also performing that night, walked in and said, "Alright, Robin, I want you to sing *Back In Black* and looked at me and said, "Reno, I want you to sing *Highway To Hell.* And we all just looked at each other in surprise and wondered to ourselves, "What are you gonna sing Brian?" His response was, " Nothin', I don't want to get all sticky and sweaty and ruin the seats of my new Bentley".

Well, we all thought he was joking until I asked him to show me his new car. Sure enough he had a new Bentley. Luckily he *was* joking and went out and sang his heart out that night proving once again that nobody does AC/DC like AC/DC.

TOMMY SHAW, Styx

Highway To Hell is so iconic - a guitar riff that can be instantly identified in the first three strikes of the opening A chord by anyone who's ever listened to the radio. I'm a fan of both Bon Scott and Brian Johnson who each seemed to have been born to sing that song. I think if you played *Highway To Hell* at a family reunion, by the time the chorus came around all aunts, uncles and grandparents would have no choice but to stand up and sing along. It's irresistible.

SAMMY HAGAR

Highway To Hell – Bon Scott was the shit.

CARMINE APPICE, Vanilla Fudge

I always liked *Highway To Hell.* Starting with the cool drum groove. Great drum sound. The guitars are awesome, really great sounds and the lyrics are just great too.

BILLY GIBBONS, ZZ Top

My favorite AC/DC song would have to be *Highway To Hell.* Quite to my amazement, I heard my grandmother singing along with it, on key and with all the words! When asked how she came onto the song, she replied, "Oh my! Sounds like a fun highway to be traveling on!" How you gonna top that?

STEVE LUKATHER, Toto

Man, I love them all. I know it's cliche but classics are classics: The two greatest opening riffs of all time. *Highway To Hell* and *Back In Black.* These guys are totally timeless!

Angus Young: author of some of the best riffs in rock.

MICHAEL MARKS/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

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1 BACK IN BLACK

From Back In Black, 1980

AC/DC
BACK IN BLACK

"*Back In Black* was a tribute to Bon and notice that AC/DC were stronger than ever."

GETTY

Thunderous Zep-like riffage and so immediately recognisable as AC/DC that even GAP used it for a TV ad, this was the perfect send-off for the late Bon Scott.

KK DOWNING, Judas Priest
For me, *Back In Black* has deep emotional components. It was our privilege to open for AC/DC in 1978-'79 on their tour in Europe. Sadly, this was the tour that was to be Bon's last. He was a real gentleman and so were the rest of the band. They were very friendly and gracious to us, and even let us ride on their luxurious bus on long journeys. We were devastated at the tragic news and really felt for the guys knowing what a mountain they had to climb for them to be able to continue. So when the *Back In Black* album finally emerged and I heard the title song it was a moment of real emotion for me.

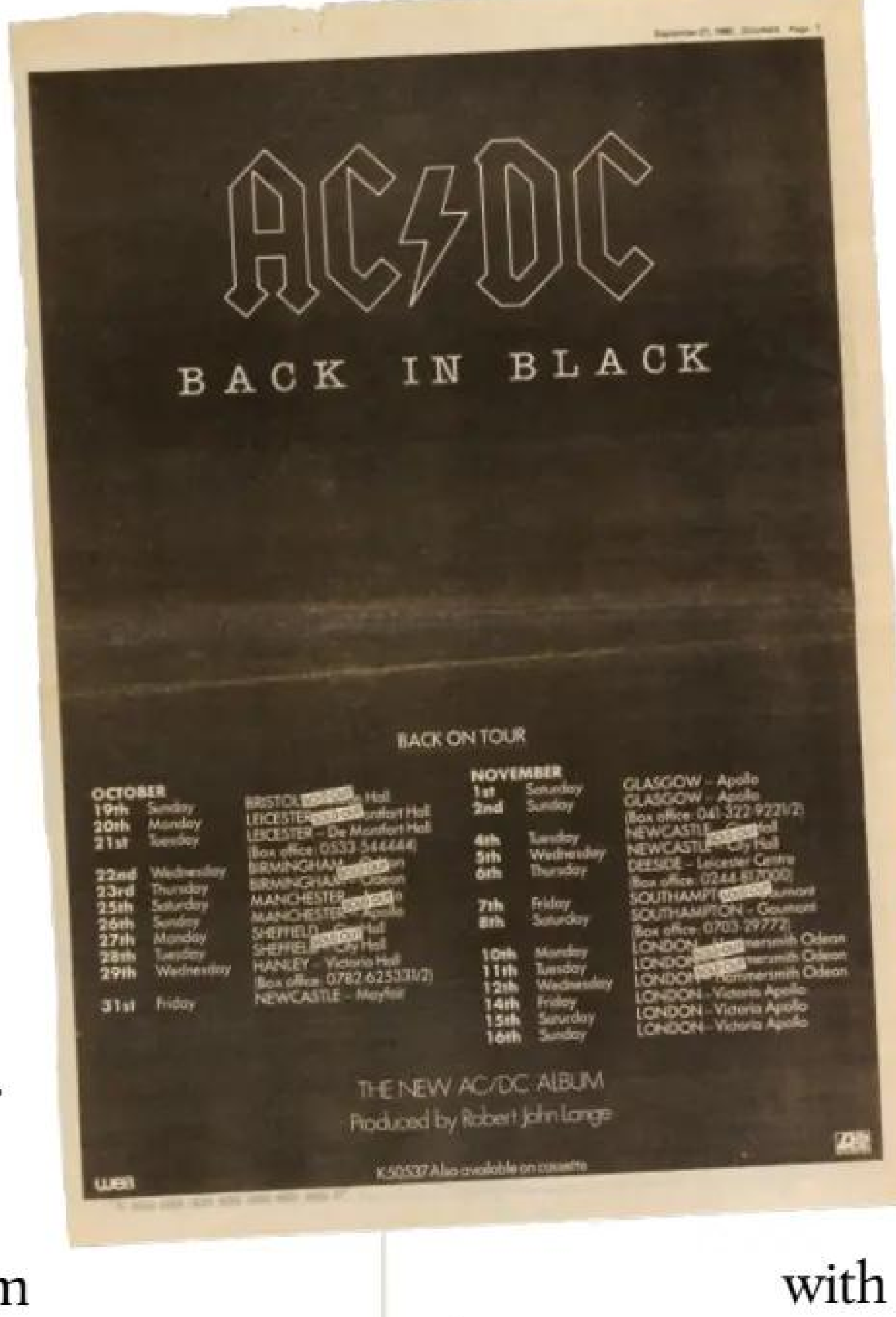
GARRY ROSSINGTON, Lynyrd Skynyrd
Back In Black's riff is so cool and simple. Whenever I heard that one it always stopped me, it was like a cool Keith Richards lick.

DOUG PINNICK, King's X
Back In Black put the groove in rock music and there's a little AC/DC in every band thereafter. They will always be the No.1 groove machine of all time.

STEVE MORSE, Deep Purple
Back In Black is my favourite. The rhythm part is heavy, of course, but it emphasises the exact muting of each chord (E, D, A) in order to give the guitar part more drive. Heavy, stark and insistent. The little blues riff at the end starts on the upbeat after each of the three chords before going on the downbeat, and gives a satisfying change. I also love the strong solo guitar lines.

CHARLIE BENANTE, Anthrax
There will never, ever be another record like *Back In Black*. Most bands learned how to play by listening to this record. AC/DC rule.

BRIAN 'HEAD' WELCH, ex-Korn
I remember I was 10 years old, in the middle of fifth grade when I got the *Back In Black* album for Christmas. After I opened all of my gifts, I rocked out to *Back In Black* a few times, then I jumped on my bike and rode around in the neighborhood telling everyone I could find that AC/DC was the best band in the world. My mind was made up – I wanted to bang my head like Angus Young when I grew up. And nobody can tell me that dreams don't come true, because a little over a decade later, I was banging my head in Korn.



AC/DC

BACK IN BLACK

BACK ON TOUR

OCTOBER		
19th	Sunday	BRISTOL [illegible] Hall
20th	Monday	LEICESTER [illegible] Montfort Hall
21st	Tuesday	LEICESTER – De Montfort Hall (Box office: 0533 544444)
22nd	Wednesday	BIRMINGHAM [illegible]
23rd	Thursday	BIRMINGHAM [illegible] Odeon
25th	Saturday	MANCHESTER [illegible]
26th	Sunday	MANCHESTER [illegible] Apollo
27th	Monday	SHEFFIELD [illegible] Hall
28th	Tuesday	SHEFFIELD [illegible] City Hall
29th	Wednesday	HANLEY – Victoria Hall (Box office: 0782 625331/2)
31st	Friday	NEWCASTLE – Mayfair
NOVEMBER		
1st	Saturday	GLASGOW – Apollo
2nd	Sunday	GLASGOW – Apollo (Box office: 041-332 9221/2)
4th	Tuesday	NEWCASTLE [illegible] Hall
5th	Wednesday	NEWCASTLE [illegible] City Hall
6th	Thursday	DEESIDE – Leisure Centre (Box office: 0244 812000)
7th	Friday	SOUTHAMPT[illegible] Gaumont
8th	Saturday	SOUTHAMPTON – Gaumont (Box office: 0703 29772)
10th	Monday	LONDON [illegible] Hammersmith Odeon
11th	Tuesday	LONDON [illegible] Hammersmith Odeon
12th	Wednesday	LONDON [illegible] Hammersmith Odeon
14th	Friday	LONDON – Victoria Apollo
15th	Saturday	LONDON – Victoria Apollo
16th	Sunday	LONDON – Victoria Apollo

THE NEW AC/DC ALBUM
Produced by Robert John Lange

K50537 Also available on cassette

JEFF PILSON, Dokken/Foreigner
Back In Black's groove is so heavy and dug in; the riff is so original, catchy and cool. The melody is soaring and filled with energy. There are a lot of changes, tempo and otherwise, to the song – but it seems so straightforward. That really is art in itself. A great title track off one of the greatest rock albums of all time.

DON POWELL, Slade
Slade played with AC/DC at Donnington. I love all of their songs but I especially love the groove of *Back In Black* and the heaviness. It's all very simple but so powerful.

STEVE PLUNKETT, Autograph
It was the brilliantly written first release and debut AC/DC vocal for Brian Johnson. After Bon Scott's death everybody wondered if AC/DC could ever make a comeback. The song was perfectly conceived as both a tribute to Bon and notice to the fans that AC/DC was stronger than ever. To boot it's one of the killer guitar riffs of all time!

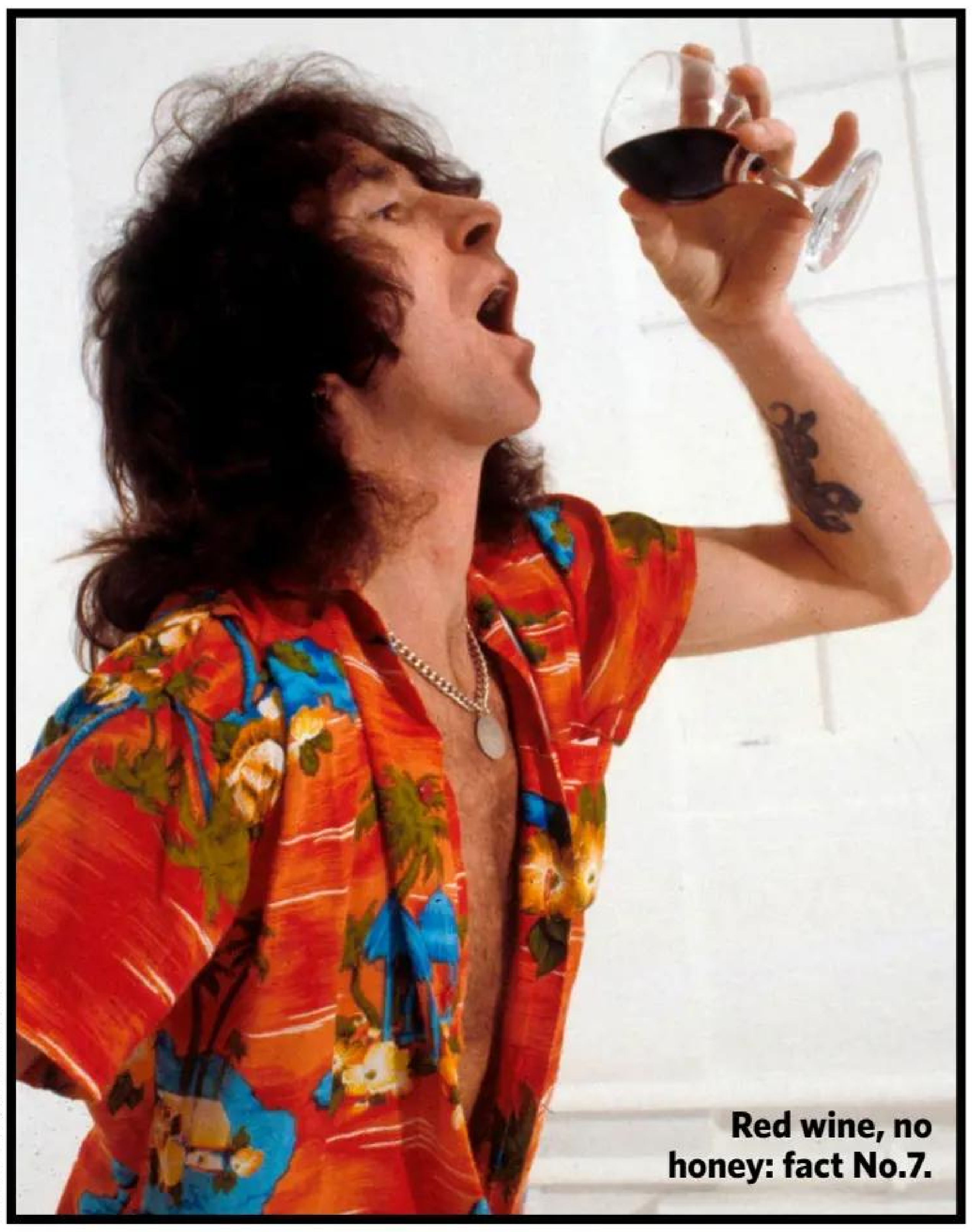
PHIL COLLEN, Def Leppard
I first got hooked on AC/DC when I heard *Highway To Hell*. But I think they perfected their game when they recorded *Back in Black*, which I reckon is the ultimate rock song. It has a sexy groove that hardly any rock band could get close to, amazingly restrained, confident guitars that are pure rock, outrageous drums and a vocal meter that is almost a rap but very rock and roll. And considering the song is based on a blues format it's extremely original.

JOHN OATES, Hall & Oates
I'd have to pick *Back In Black* because the hook is so perfectly simple and elegant in a heavy sort of way… just the title four times!

LUKE MORLEY, Thunder
Back In Black says everything about AC/DC. It's one of the best guitar riffs ever conceived and it has a groove a mile deep, which is some feat for a hard rock band. Play this anywhere and people will always get up and dance to it.

20 Facts To Turn You Into An AC/DC Expert

From *Zorba The Greek* to Iran's nuclear facilities, **Susie Masino**'s new AC/DC FAQ book promises to reveal "All That's Left to Know about the World's True Rock'n'Roll Band". We gave it to *Prog* magazine editor **Jerry Ewing** (author of two books about the band) to test the theory. Here's what he discovered…


FIN COSTELLO/REDFERNS/GETTY

Red wine, no honey: fact No.7.

1 AC/DC's fist ever headline show was at the Melbourne Festival Hall on November 4, 1975. They were supported by Stevie Young (who would later be in the frame as a replacement for Bon Scott) and John Paul Young of *Love Is In The Air* fame. A promo video or *High Voltage* was shot fon four cameras. Applause from George Harrison's *Concert For Bangladesh* was dubbed onto the video.

2 Bon would stick his fringe down with Scotch tape after he'd showered, to prevent it curling up too much

3 Brian Johnson wrote the lyrics to *You Shook Me All Night Long* while sat on the bog.

4 Bon Scott was a big fan of show tunes, a passion he picked up as a boy.

5 Cheap Trick are the only band that AC/DC have ever invited to encore with them. The bands first played together at Greensboro in North Carolina on December 18, 1977. The two bands enjoyed a friendly relationship, continuing to jam together over the years. The only other person invited to jam with AC/DC was Atlantic Records exec Phil Carson, in Brussels on January 25, 1981, on a cover of Little Richard's *Lucille*.

6 Back in the very early days when Dave Evans fronted the band, they performed a set of Chuck Berry and Rolling Stones songs at a close friend's wedding. One guest asked them to play *Zorba The Greek*, but the band did not know it. "Malcolm said 'Give me a minute', he went away and practiced for a while, all from ear. Then Malcolm said 'Tell him yeah, we'll do it'."

7 Bon's early morning ritual was to gargle with red wine and honey, to help retain the raspy edge to his voice

8 When Iran was struck by computer hackers some time between 2009 and 2010, the attacking virus, Stuxnet, caused thousands of computers in Iran's nuclear facilities to break down, all blasting out *Thunderstruck* at full volume!

9 Angus's wife, Ellen, allegedly told a fan who was travelling on the same train as her and Angus between gigs that when the band were recording *The Razors Edge*, they once came into the studio to discover backing vocals where none had been recorded. The vocals purportedly sounded just like Bon Scott.

10 When Bon Scott posted out his Christmas cards in 1979, something he did every year, he didn't pay enough postage, meaning many of the cards were delayed and arrived late – some of them after he had died on February 19, 1980.

11 Kirriemuir, where Bon Scott was born, is in the county of Angus. Bon's mother Isa's maiden name was Mitchell, which is Malcolm Young's middle name.

12 The original singer in Aussie band the Velvet Underground, with whom Malcolm Young played before he formed AC/DC, was called Brian Johnson.

13 The very first time Bon Scott sang live with AC/DC was on October 5, 1975, which is Brian Johnson's birthday.

14 The original album cover for *Highway To Hell* is purported to have been an image of the devil driving a car, peering in his rear-view mirror, with the band all in the back seat. In the end the record company baulked at the idea, and instead used a photo from the *Powerage* shoot, super-imposing horns and a satanic tail on Angus. One of the new shots was used on the back cover.

15 Bon favoured a prominent crease in his jeans, and could often be found ironing his stage clothes on the bar before a gig.

16 Angus Young is well known for playing his now trademark Gibson SG guitar. The reason is that the SG's slim neck is the only one he can get his hands around comfortably.

17 At Brian Johnson's first audition for AC/DC he sang *Whole Lotta Rosie*, *Highway To Hell* and Ike and Tina Tuner's *Nutbush City Limits*. At his second, he was asked to come up with the lyrics to *Given The Dog A Bone*.

18 Bon Scott's motorbike riding skills were legendary, earning him the nickname Ronnie Roadtest.

19 Bon took the Tube to the band's first ever gig at Hammersmith Odeon in November 1976, and arrived late. Their manager, Michael Browning, had sent out a roadie to take a photo of the band's name in lights. When the photos were processed they showed Bon Scott walking up the stairs with his bag slung over his shoulder.

20 Marvel Comics were planning to release a unique comic book to tie in with the release of *Ballbreaker*, the artwork for which used various images from the work. The storyline apparently featured Bon in hell. Bon wins a card game, allowing AC/DC to visit him so he can sing with them one more time. Given *Ballbreaker* was Brian's seventh album with the band, it's seems spurious to believe the band would allow such a storyline. Soon after, Marvel downsized and the comic book never materialised.

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